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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

VASHTI'S FATE.

By HELEN CORWIN PIERCE.



THE

Select Series

No. 78.

NEW YORK
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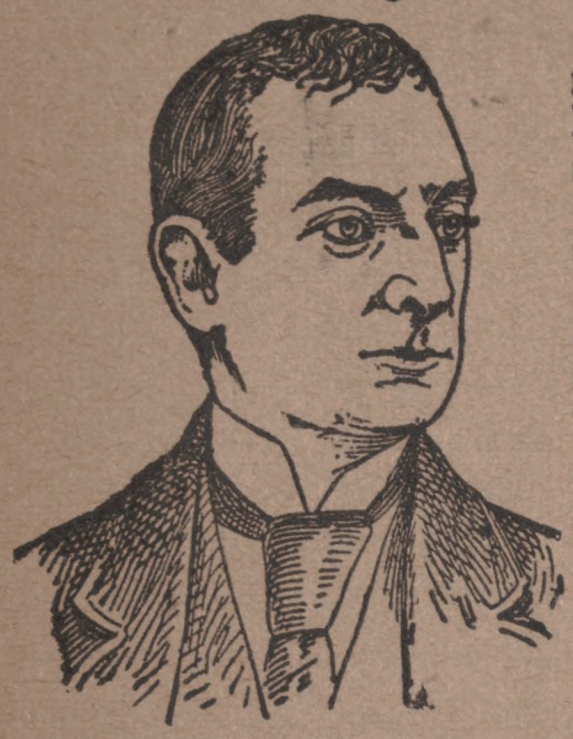
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VASHTI'S FATE;

OR,

PURIFIED BY FIRE.

A NOVEL.

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BY

HELEN CORWIN PIERCE,

AUTHOR OF

"BADLY MATCHED," Etc.

NEW YORK:
STREET & SMITH, Publishers,
31 Rose Street.

(1891)

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THE CURSE OF EVERLEIGH.

CHAPTER I.

TRAGEDY.

It was a glorious morning in early June. In the great, wide doorway at Everleigh, stood two children, little girls. One, Lenore Everleigh, had a round, roguish face, large, brown, laughing eyes, sparkling and bright; short chestnut curls disported themselves over her white dimpled shoulders, and her round, plump arms were flung carelessly over the shaggy coat of a splendid New Foundland dog.

Her sister, Vashti Everleigh, leaned against a column of the porch, beautiful as a little queen. Lenore looked about eight, while Vashti was evidently older, perhaps eleven. She had a pure oval face, clear and pale, eyes slumbrous, shadowy, mournful; thick, long, black hair, that was put plainly back, and depended in silken braids below her waist, tied at the ends with gay bows of ribbon. She was slender and thin, quite too much so for beauty, but there was a certain shapeliness in her proportions, and a grace in her movements, that gave a promise of redemption, at no distant day, from all trace of awkwardness.

Nora, as the younger of the two was commonly called,

had been romping with the dog, and, with her pretty flushed cheeks, was resting. Suddenly she started up again, and with her curls, and her pink sash streaming behind, went off at a run down the road, calling, "Bute, Bute."

The dog shook his shaggy sides, and looked with his almost human eyes up at Vashti, wistfully, who seemed to understand him. There crossed her lips a faint, sweet smile that gladdened her whole face, and as Nora called, "Come, Vashti," she bounded down the steps, Bute following with long, graceful leaps, shaking his handsome head, and making frantic demonstrations of joy. Now in the front of them, now back, down this walk, up that, the two girls scampering like mad away from him, and laughing till the whole air rang with melody.

Too much engaged to notice anything but their fun, they did not see a gentleman in sportsman's dress, who was coming, at a swift run, up the road, his gun in his hand, and an empty game-bag by his side.

He had a dark, handsome face like Vashti's—the same wide, high, pale brow, shaded by heavy masses of jetty hair —a small, almost womanish, hand and foot; but his eyes —his great black eyes—were luminous with wild, fiery excitement, as he fled at that headlong pace up the road to the house, looking, at almost every step, over his shoulder.

The dog crossed his path; he stumbled and almost fell over him, and regaining his feet, gave the poor animal a kick with his heavy-booted foot.

With a low growl like distant thunder, Bute crouched in the path, as though about to spring on his master, his fierce teeth gleaming savagely, and his eyes like two coals of fire. A moment he crouched, quivering in every muscle, but as the gentleman, with a muttered oath, kept on his swift way, Bute straightened himself again, and with his eyes still

fiercely glowing, his ears flung back, he stood looking after his master, at the same time giving a loud, prolonged howl, that sounded like the warning wail of a Banshee. Poor Bute! he had not looked upon his master's face for naught.

Vashti had seen that face too; and gasping for breath, stood transfixed with indefinable terror; while Nora, all her roguish, laughing beauty eclipsed by sudden anger, her eyes flashing through tears, looked after her father, shaking her dimpled fist, and crying:

"I'd be ashamed to kick a dog! Bute, poor Bute, why didn't you bite him?" with her arms about the dog's neck.

Bute never noticed her, save with another dismal howl, and another flinging back of his silky, drooping ears.

Suddenly there was a sound like the distant tramp of many feet, which grew on the ear, nearer and nearer, till a small band of men came in sight, followed at no great distance by another assemblage of men and boys. The first band marched with glittering bayonets in line, stern and silent; the latter seemed a noisy rabble. Bute shook his head vengefully as they approached; Nora cowered close to him, and Vashti, with one look, fled like a wounded fawn to the house.

They came steadily on—tramp, tramp. Bute shook off the child's arm, and, with his great, savage jaws distended, began to pace to and fro in the road, glancing with livid eyes at the band of armed men, who came to a full stop at sight of him, looking irresolutely at their leader.

"Forward!" cried the captain, putting himself a pace back, however.

With the word, before the men could move, Bute, with a fierce bound and a noise between a howl and a bark,

sprang directly at the captain's throat. In an instant fifty guns were raised and aimed at the dog, but their fire was withheld, lest they might hit the captain also.

The poor man struggled in the dog's vengeful hold, and vainly endeavored to speak.

At this juncture little Nora Everleigh flew to the rescue, crying:

"Don't hurt him! don't! I'll take him off, but don't hurt him. He thinks you have no right here."

At the sight of her pretty, innocent face every gun dropped; and, putting her bit of a hand on Bute, she said, sharply:

"Down, Bute! down, sir—down, I say!"

The brave fellow slowly, and with evident reluctance, released his prisoner.

"Come, Bute!" called Nora.

He followed her, looking back at every step; and as the captain said, in a very mild voice, "Forward," he came to a full stop, and faced toward him with a warning snap of his white teeth.

"Here, Bute! here, sir! I am ashamed of you!"

He turned again at her bidding, and in the same instant there was the sound of a shot, and Nora's brave playfellow fell with a cry that was almost human, both his forelegs dangling.

"Oh, Bute, dear Bute! have they killed you?" cried poor Nora, flinging herself down by him.

Bute uttered a low whine, which deepened to such a vindictive howl as the armed band, after an instant's delay, defiled swiftly by him, that the brave captain raised his gun again to shoot.

"Leave him alone, sir! Don't you see he can't stir?

Leave him alone. I wish I had let him kill you," said Nora, angrily, her pretty lip curling with defiance.

The man bit his lip and frowned, but lowered his gun and walked on.

Meanwhile Roscoe Everleigh, as he crossed the threshold of the wide doorway, came face to face with his wife—a lovely, delicate-looking woman, with long fair curls and soft blue eyes. At sight of his wild face she stopped aghast.

"What has happened, Roscoe?"

"No matter what! Where's Margery? I'm wounded myself, I believe."

He leaned heavily against the wall as he spoke, flinging down his gun, and loosening his coat with hands that twitched nervously, and fell away from his vest dripping with his own blood.

With a piercing scream Mrs. Everleigh fell fainting on the floor. Margery Gresham was not far away; she appeared almost instantly—a tall, majestic-looking woman, not beautiful, but far from plain, with bands of braided hair about her head. She glanced with a pair of keen gray eyes at her sister, and from her to the wounded man, seeing, without further ado, that he was most in need—that something terrible had happened.

"Ho, Philip! Elise!" she called, in clear, loud tones, supporting Everleigh, who looked ready to fall.

He smiled wanly at Margery, saying, with short gasps:

"I've—done it—at last—Margery—the very thing—you said—I would; and the blood-hounds are after me—already."

She glanced sharply at the door; her quick ear caught the sound of the approaching commotion, and with Philip's

help she lifted him bodily, and hurried him off up stairs, while Elise attended to her fallen mistress.

They were not an instant too soon. As they laid Roscoe Everleigh upon his bed in a dead swoon, the hall below was filled with armed men, the house surrounded, or an attempt made to surround it and guard every possible avenue of escape—a vain precaution if Everleigh had attempted to escape—a needless one, certainly, under the circumstances.

The captain of the band marched pompously up and down, giving orders to his men to turn the house inside out, if necessary, till one of them came to tell him that a woman above stairs guarded the door of a room, and refused them entrance.

A woman! He was just man enough to bully a woman, and he marched straight up the stairs, his long sword trailing behind him.

Margery Gresham was no woman to endure bullying. She was a perfect grenadier of a woman—large, strong, masculine in her appearance, with a snarl on her lip and a scowl on her brow that made the valiant captain shake in his boots. He made a show of bravado, however, demanding entrance, but never moving from the stairway.

Margery Gresham's tall figure seemed to acquire additional stature at his demand, and she smiled grimly.

"Off with you," she said, "and send your lieutenant. I won't treat with you."

The soldiers, a few steps down the stairway, evidently enjoyed the scene amazingly; and when the doughty captain hesitated about obeying the female grenadier, and that personage, seizing him by the neck of his coat, dropped him delicately over the banisters, the laugh that went round was irrepressible.

The captain made a great effort to recover his dignity, strutted and swore, and foamed to and fro, and at last declaring that he would not fight with a woman, dispatched his lieutenant above stairs.

At his approach Margery flung wide the door, saying, as she pointed to a still inner room:

"There he is, in there; but he's got his death-wound, I believe. Small chance of his being able to be moved at present."

She waved her hand majestically for the officer to pass, and with a respectful inclination of his head he did so.

Roscoe Everleigh lay upon a snowy couch, his handsome face white as the pillow it pressed. Philip was endeavoring to stanch the blood, which flowed darkly over the counterpane, from a wound by his side, and two or three other servants were busy about him, doing whatever they could, which was little enough, till the physician arrived. He had already been sent for, and the messenger must have found him near at hand, for he followed close upon the officer's step into the room. He was a small man, with keen, bright, humorous eyes, a large nose, and a shuffling gait; a man about forty. He proceeded immediately to the bedside, examining the wounded man attentively, without appearing to notice anybody else in the room.

Everleigh was still unconscious, but as the doctor proceeded with his ministrations, he opened his eyes feebly, looked, and closed them again with a deep sigh.

The lieutenant stood by till the doctor had finished, and then followed him silently from the room.

"Can that man be moved to-night without risk of his life?" he asked.

"No, sir!" was the emphatic reply.

"Will he live, think you?"

"I couldn't tell you, sir. What do you want of him?"

The officer turned upon the doctor a look of surprise at the question.

"I know what folks say; that Roscoe Everleigh is a murderer; but I don't believe it, sir. What were the circumstances?"

"Very aggravating ones," said the lieutenant, pausing before he reached the door that led into the hall. "He picked a quarrel with a young fellow down here, (Neil Roque they call him, I believe,) and shot him as he would a fox."

"Nonsense! he's shot himself."

"One of our men shot after him as he was escaping. We were just passing when the fray took place; and when we saw the young fellow fall, one of our men, a brother of Neil's, fired after Everleigh as he was running away."

"And then you must needs march your whole troop up here, frightening the family almost to death, and rousing the whole neighborhood. You must be brave men if it takes so many of you to catch one, and he wounded."

"That was the captain's doings," said the lieutenant, with a significant shrug of his shoulder; "but, doctor, it strikes me as a little singular that this man, if he is so bad as you say he is, was able to get home."

"Nothing singular at all. Excitement kept him up till he got here, and he dropped then from the reaction and loss of blood. I judge you have never been in action, sir. When you have once seen a battle you will see stranger things than this. I knew a man once to run twenty paces after he was shot through the heart."

The officer bowed, but looked incredulous.

"Fact, sir," said the doctor, taking out his snuff-box,

offering it to the lieutenant, and coolly taking a pinch himself.

The officer bowed again, and proceeded down stairs to report to the captain, who chafed a good deal at his account, but concluded finally to have a guard at the house, till the sheriff himself should arrive.

Among the men stationed outside the house, was a young, broad-chested fellow, with a boyish, handsome face, and frank, fearless eye. He stood down the road from the house, near where little Nora Everleigh sat, unconscious of the troubles indoors, with poor Bute's shaggy head upon her lap, crying and caressing her wounded playmate with loving words.

The young soldier looked with sympathetic eyes at the child, and gradually approaching, spoke to her:

"Is he very much hurt, little one?"

She lifted her head angrily at first, but his kindly tone reassured her, and as he put his hand upon the head of her favorite, without any sign of displeasure from the dog, she smiled tremulously at him, saying:

"Oh, sir, can't you do something for him?"

"I don't know; perhaps I can; I'm a bit of a doctor. Can you get me some scraps of linen, and some nice pine stick?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Is there anything else?"

"A basin of water."

He tenderly lifted the bleeding paws from her lap onto a pillow of grass, and she fled away on her errand. Entering by the servants' hall, those whom she met were too busy to ask her any question, and having obtained what she came for, she hurried back without being hindered by any one.

The young doctor proceeded very scientifically to wash

and set, first one limb and then the other, Bute watching him, with a strangely human expression—and giving occasionally a long, low whine.

"Can you keep him still now, do you suppose, till it gets well?"

"Oh, yes, sir, that I can. He's the best dog you ever saw. He always does just as I tell him. I never saw him act as he did to-day. He understands what I say almost as well as you do. See how pleased he looks when I praise him."

The dog tried to lift his head from the grass, with a soft bark, rubbing it against the little hand that caressed him, and looking as though he did in truth understand her.

"Yes, I see; he's a very nice dog, and I hope he'll be as well as ever again before long," said the young soldier.

Nora did not reply, save with a tearfully eloquent look. He stood looking at her, wondering that she did not ask why the soldiers had come to Everleigh. Presently she raised her head, looking at him wistfully.

"Well," said he, with a smile, "what is it?"

She blushed prettily.

"Only, sir, I would like to know what your name is, very much, you've been so kind to me and Bute."

He blushed, too, very boyishly, saying, laughingly:

"The boys call me Dr. Leonidas. They call me Leon Brownlee at home."

His eyes were dashed with tears as he said "at home," and he turned his young face away, lest Nora should see how those tender words moved him.

With a rare delicacy she affected not to see his agitation, repeating half to herself:

"Leon Brownlee—Leon Brownlee! It is a very nice name, I think. I should like to have a brother Leon."

"Haven't you any brother?"

"Yes, I've a brother; he's bigger than I am, but his name is Francis Roscoe Everleigh. Roscoe is after papa and grandpapa, you know."

"And what is your name?"

"Leonore. They always call me Nora, though."

Here was an interval of silence, and then Nora said:

"I want to ask you something else, but mamma says I am always too curious, and she would scold me if she knew I asked you anything so rude. But I want to ask you so much."

"You may ask me anything you like, Nora," said he, gravely.

"May I? Thank you. What have you and all these soldiers come here for? Papa often has the soldiers come here to eat fruit; but I don't think he knew of these."

"Why don't you think he knew we were coming?"

"Because he went up the walk before you came in sight; and he was cross, and kicked Bute for being in the way. No, I don't think he knew you were coming."

"Well, he did, Nora. I am very sure he did."

Nora longed to ask him more, but notwithstanding the permission just accorded her, something in his face deterred her.

When the company, with its gallant captain, departed, Leon was left with the lieutenant and three others. Leon staid by the little girl, amusing himself with her lively chat and piquant expressions, and she so far forgot her trouble as to join in the laugh ere long, when suddenly her sister Vashti came out of the house, and ran down the road to her.

"Come away, Nora, come away," she whispered; "papa is very ill."

"Papa very ill!" said Nora, incredulously, resisting her sister's efforts to lead her away.

"Yes, very ill—somebody shot him; and Dr. Gracie has been with him this long time."

"Now, Vashti," pouted Nora, "who told you that? I saw papa go in only a little while ago, as well as I am."

"He was bleeding then," replied Vashti, "and it was as much as he could do to get to the house. Come away, Nora—come right away; mamma is asking for you."

"I don't believe it," said Nora, resentfully; but she looked white and frightened, and, forgetful of Bute or Leon, hurried away without a word to either.

As they entered the hall, which was empty, Vashti pointed silently, with averted face, at a little pool of blood by the door, and Nora's terrified eyes followed the ensanguined trace plashed here and there across the hall and up the stairs. Wrenching her hand away from Vashti, she crept cowering and trembling away toward the stairs, her face pitiful to look upon, with sudden horror.

Vashti followed her, scarcely less appalled, saying, in a frightened whisper:

"Not there, sister—you mustn't go there; come to mamma's room;" and, with arms flung round each other, the two children went shuddering down the hall.

Mrs. Everleigh reclined, bolstered with pillows, upon a couch near an open window, and Elise was fanning her. The room, gorgeous with hangings of crimson and gold, the crimson-draped window and couch framed in her lovely, pallid face with a startling contrast that made her look something ghostly. A strikingly beautiful boy was hanging over the back of her couch, trying hard to keep back the tears that would force themselves through his black-lashed eyes.

As the little girls opened the door, Elise raised her hand as if to warn them back; but Mrs. Everleigh turned her wan face toward them, saying, feebly:

"Come in, dears; poor things! come and stay with mamma."

CHAPTER II.

JUSTICE BAFFLED.

Meanwhile Roscoe Everleigh, in the hands of the doctor and Margery Gresham, vibrated between consciousness and delirium.

Dr. Gracie remained with him through the afternoon and night. The next day he was no better, nor the next. A week he lay in the most precarious state, and all that while a sheriff's posse was in the house. The soldiers had gone long before. Poor Bute, well cared for, was already beginning to limp about; but Roscoe Everleigh seemed likely to fall from the greedy grasp of justice into the no less covetous clutches of the mysterious "monarchs of Plutonian realms." Margery Gresham looked grim and forbidding, and guarded him alike from friend and foe. The children and wife even were relentlessly banished from the sick-room. Whatever Margery needed was taken by Philip or Elise to an ante-room, where she took her meals, never leaving the sick-room for an instant, except in the doctor's care, which was most assiduous.

One week from the day of the alleged murder, the sheriff's men were dismissed with bitter words by Margery Gresham. Roscoe Everleigh was *dead*, she told them, and with scarce a warning.

The sheriff was permitted to see him—ghostly, cold, and stiff—there was some legal formula gone over with, and then the *posse comitatus* took itself off.

It was rumored among people that he had taken his own life to escape the ignominious and terrible fate of a murderer.

However that was, the preparation for the funeral went on with remarkable expedition. The public was strictly excluded from all participation in the grave ceremonials thereof, and, like a justly incensed public, revenged itself by talking.

There were mourning habiliments at Everleigh—a new mound in the little burial ground sacred to the Everleighs—a somber cloud of mystery, seclusion, and gloom shrouding all approach to the unhappy subject, and the sad episode was filed away among the records of the past.

Mrs. Everleigh from that bitter time became a confirmed invalid, and Margery Gresham grew several shades grimmer and sterner, and time went on.

CHAPTER III.

A SHOCK.

Three years! Three sorrowful years had left their shadows at Everleigh, and now "October's leaf was brown and sere." The road and the pretty wild-wood paths were strewn with golden and russet-hued leaves, and here and there a little scentless, white-faced blossom smiled wanly on the still autumnal day. Now and then the fingers of the autumn winds fluttered a little coyly, and a shower of gorgeous hues floated softly to the earth.

Margery Gresham stood a little away from the house, her stately head uncovered, her bonnet in one hand, the other idly smoothing the banded hair from her weary-looking face. Her gray eyes dwelt contemplatively upon the wooded vistas; her ear gathered up the low refrain of the fluttering leaves, and, with serene thoughts touching up the somber hues of her face, she slowly tied her bonnet, and went with folded hands along a secluded walk. She was returning, after an hour's absence, when a shadow flung across her path caused her to raise her eyes. A man in soldier's attire stood in the way, touching his cap respectfully, and saying:

"Miss Margery."

She paused, waiting for him to tell his errand, her eyes dwelling almost impatiently on him.

He looked confused, touched his cap again, and said:

"If you please, ma'am, I'm Neil Roque."

The misty gray eyes had wandered away from him, but at these words they flashed back upon him haughtily.

"What do you mean?"

"That I am Neil Roque, the man it was thought Mr. Everleigh shot."

She surveyed him sternly, every vestige of color going slowly out of her face. She put both her excited hands upon his shoulders, turning him to the light that came brightly through a vista in the trees.

"Oh, it's me, ma'am, and nobody else. Mister Everleigh didn't kill me, but he hurt me pretty bad, and my brother helped me off, and pretended I was killed, for fear he should be arrested himself for shooting Mister Everleigh. You see, he thought they wouldn't be so apt to touch him if they thought I was dead, so he smuggled me off, and himself too, and he got a friend to fool the offi-

cers with a 'cock-and-bull' story about me falling off the cliff into the lake when I was shot. We laid low till we heard the mister was dead, and then we joined the army again. My brother was killed at Plattsburg; and, thinking maybe the family'd be glad to know there wasn't any murder done at all, I came right away, as soon as I could, to tell 'em. I'd come afore, if I hadn't been afeared they'd string my brother right up. That's all, ma'am. I'm staying at Tim Jarvy's; he's my sister's husband; if you should want anything of me, you'll find me there."

He touched his cap again, and went swiftly away.

Margery Gresham's nerveless hands dropped heavily to her side, and, as she leaned against a tree, her face darkened with a shadow like unto death's. Gradually she slipped away from that support, and, unable to stand, sat down upon the ground. With shuddering fingers she untied and took off her bonnet, and, dipping her hand into a little spring that bubbled from the root of a tree, she moistened her pallid lips, and face, and head mechanically, forcing the tide of life to surge up again from her benumbed heart.

"Oh!" she moaned, "I must not die now. Father of mercy, help me to live and work out my fate! Oh, life! fail me not now."

She sat with her head resting upon her hands till the evening shadows gathered close about her, and then, struggling to her feet, she went slowly and painfully to the house.

In her own room, she rang for a servant, bidding her send Philip Bryce to her, with some wine. Philip came, and stood aghast at the deadly pallor of her face. He poured her a glass of wine without a word. She took it,

sat a few moments with weary, folded hands, looking drearily upon the floor, then rising, said :

"I think I am strong enough now. I must go to Mrs. Everleigh. She must not hear this from awkward lips."

"What is it, Miss Margery? What has happened?" asked Philip, with the liberty which his long service warranted.

She lifted her heavy eyelids, and looked at him.

"Our bitter calamity, Philip, is all for naught. Neil Roque is as living as you and I."

"Miss Margery!" exclaimed the man, throwing up his hands, "it is impossible."

"I have seen this man, this very afternoon, with my own eyes—I have heard him with my own ears. There is no mistake about it—we may as well face the fact. But for Heaven's sake, Philip, be careful. When I am calmer, I will tell you what particulars I know. We ought to be thankful there was no murder done, but I am so miserable I don't know whether I am thankful or not. It is bitter, bitter to think it was all for naught. My poor Roscoe!"

She sank into her chair again, sighing heavily, and wiping beaded drops from her forehead.

Philip approached close to her, his eyes dim with tears.

"Don't take on so, Miss Margery—don't," he said, in a low voice, touching her bowed head with his hand. "It seemed for the best then, and it can't be helped now. The same fate always overtakes the Everleighs, I've heard. It's an unhappy house, doomed to this inheritance. It's not your fault, nor mine. We could neither help nor hinder."

She got up again, pushing back her braided hair as though it oppressed her, and went out with those words dwelling upon her lips like a wail—"For naught!"

In Mrs. Everleigh's room she found the three children —Vashti reading by the window, and Nora romping with her brother. Mrs. Everleigh from her easy-chair smiled upon them.

Miss Gresham peremptorily sent the children out of the room, and drawing a chair near to her sister, said :

"How are you this evening, Eva?"

"Better than usual, Margery; I haven't felt so light-hearted in a long while."

A lovely smile broke over her wan face, as she lifted her soft eyes to her sister's face.

Margery sat with her back to the lamp, else Mrs. Everleigh could scarce have failed to be startled by the expression of her countenance.

"Lay your head on my shoulder, Eva, as you used to do when we were little girls; I have some news to tell you."

"News?" said Mrs. Everleigh, yielding to Margery's embrace. "What can it be? Is it good, sister?"

"Yes," broke from Margery's lips, with an energy that startled the invalid. Resuming her former tone, she continued : "At least it is not bad—certainly not—it is good, Eva. Roscoe is—Roscoe was not a murderer! Neil Roque did not die. I saw him to-day. It was all a cheat —an imposition from beginning to end."

The last words, spoken, in spite of her, with bitter emphasis, were unheard by Mrs. Everleigh, who had fainted. Margery lifted her slight, emaciated form to a couch, and applied restoratives. Very soon Mrs. Everleigh came to herself, with a gush of happy tears, and a burst of thankful prayer.

"Oh, my God, I thank thee!"

Margery rose, and paced the floor impatiently. Forcing

her tones to be calm, she said, pausing by Mrs. Everleigh, and dropping a hot kiss on her face:

"There, sister, quiet yourself and sleep; I will go now. I do not think you had best talk any more to-night. I will send Elise to you. Darling sister, good-night."

She went away to her room, to pass the night in a restless pace, to and fro, conning, with a bleeding heart, the problem of life.

Everleigh was an old place; built, it was said, by a Lord Roscoe Everleigh, who had at some period far back come over from England to America, and built this spacious mansion of stone, half castle, half palace, requiring at his death, that for certain cogent reasons, his descendants should make Everleigh their home always. It was said, that through several generations, each possessor of Everleigh had renewed and strengthened this requirement by will, and that nobody had ever known an Everleigh live for any length of time away from the old place.

Singular also to tell, the members of the family had always been confined to a limited number. Never more than three children had gladdened the parental hearts at Everleigh; and this same weird fatality seemed to pursue till there was rarely more than one left to heir the name.

The house at Everleigh had its region of forlorn, dismantled rooms; great suites of apartments, where, through the ivy-mantled windows, the bat and the owl flitted drearily, and built their nests among the ruins of what had been richly carved wainscot; worm-eaten now, and defaced by time and neglect.

It seemed by common consent, that each succeeding proprietor had made no effort to recover this portion of the house from decay. There were strange tales told of these rooms; of sights and sounds which the wind, the old

faded, swaying tapestry, credulity and marvelousness might, or might not have been answerable for. The Everleighs always shrugged their shoulders, and looked darkly repellent whenever the subject was adverted to.

This portion of Everleigh was called when necessary to be spoken of, "The Hermitage." It seemed to have been built first, and bore the appearance somewhat of an entirely separate structure. The halls which traversed it were higher, narrower, darker; the rooms lighted by small windows, like loopholes, in the deep walls.

CHAPTER IV.

FAMILY JARS—EVERLEIGH TRAITS.

A glad morning, serene and fresh. Mrs. Everleigh had crept from her room out to a little vine-wreathed porch, where the breeze that fanned her delicate temples had a breath of early morning fragrance.

Presently came Francis, with his dark, bright eyes, to kiss his mother "Good-morning," and go gayly away to hunt, with his light fowling-piece. There were tears in Mrs. Everleigh's eyes as she looked after him. Francis was very like what his father was once, people said.

Vashti came also after a little, for her good-morning kiss, the receipt of which brought tears freshly up again in mamma's tender eyes.

"Where is Nora?" she asked of Vashti.

"She is coming; she stopped to romp with Bute in the great hall. I told her not to, for Aunt Margery doesn't like her to play in the house with Bute, but she will do it."

"That is very naughty of her; she is a great deal of trouble to her aunt, I am afraid. I do wish she would mind Margery."

"Why, mamma? Why should we mind her? I don't like to be governed by her any more than Nora does, but I generally am, to save a fuss. Aunt Margery acts as though she owned us all bodily. I don't like it at all," said Vashti, haughtily.

"I don't think she does act so, dear; I am afraid all this unpleasantness is in your own heart."

"Don't talk so, mamma, for goodness' sake, as if I were a naughty child who did not know her own mind. I am fourteen. I am not a child any longer; and I am tired of being treated as one."

Mrs. Everleigh sighed, but made no answer.

"Yes," continued Vashti, her smooth, dark cheek taking a deeper glow, "I don't see why she should domineer over us."

"Don't speak so, child. I don't like to hear it."

"I don't see why it should annoy you if I don't like Aunt Margery."

Mrs. Everleigh did not reply, but leaned wearily back in her chair, shading her sad eyes with her slender, fragile hand. Vashti was about to speak again, when there broke upon the air a series of interjective sounds, between a laugh and a cry.

"Aunt Margery and Nora having a fracas, I'll venture," exclaimed Vashti.

In another moment Nora burst into the room, a curious mixture of smiles and tears upon her archly pretty face. Bute followed her, with a barking and bounding that caused quite a commotion on the porch.

"You shouldn't bring him here," said Mrs. Everleigh, nervously. "Go away, Bute."

"I wonder if there is any place where Bute and I can play," pouted Nora, with a roguish sparkle of her tearful eyes, as Bute departed down the steps. "Aunt Margery says don't go there, and you say don't come here. I wonder where dogs go to when they die?"

"For shame, Nora!" said Vashti.

"For shame yourself! You'd be raging all day if you had been served as I have just now. Here, mamma, kiss the place to make it well," holding up her dimpled arm, discolored with the livid print of fingers, as though a rough hand had pressed the delicate flesh too harshly.

Mrs. Everleigh looked a moment, with legible heart-ache on her face, and burst into tears. The arm was around her neck in an instant, and Nora was kissing her, and crying too.

"Oh, mamma, I am so sorry. Don't cry, mamma; I wouldn't have made you cry for anything. I meant to be so good to-day."

"Did Aunt Margery do that?" said Vashti, sternly, pointing to the discolored arm.

"Yes, she did it, but I deserved it. I was playing with Bute in the hall, when she came out of her room. You know noise, especially in the house, annoys her very much. I did not see her till she was close upon us, and then I darted down one of the passages with Bute after me. Aunty followed. I pulled up suddenly at the door of the Hermitage. For once it was open, and glad of the chance, I scrambled down the dark passage. I had hardly crossed the threshold when I felt Aunt Margery's hand on my arm. I thought it was Bute's teeth, it hurt so. She was very angry, or something—it looked more like fright than

anger, come to think—and she landed me outside the door in a twinkling, I can tell you.

"'How dare you go there?' she said; 'your dog even has more sense than that.'

"Indeed, he had not offered to follow me into the Hermitage. I was so full of laugh then, I couldn't be still, so I broke away from her and ran off here. I left her double-bolting the door, and I've a notion *somebody* will catch it for leaving it open. So you see it was all my own fault."

"I don't see any such thing!" said Vashti, her eyes flashing.

"No, I dare say you don't. You'd have raised the house if she had put the weight of her little finger on you. Precious Vashti! but you see I don't lay up such things,' said Nora, a laugh dancing in her eyes again, like sunshine seen through a delicious April shower.

"No," said Vashti, taking up her angry walk again, "and the more fool you. Wonderful little Everleigh blood you've got, to stand that, and all the rest you take from Miss Margery Gresham!"

"It's nater, as Pete says," said Nora, coolly, her arm still round her mother's neck, and her other hand softly putting the hair off her face, and wiping the tears that still fell slowly.

From the shadow of the vines that darkened the doorway, stepped, all at once, Margery Gresham, her face marble-white even to her lips, her keen gray eyes glittering. She did not look angry—the expression of her face was beyond words. It was as if she had stood, a moment before, in the very jaws of death.

"Aunt Margery," cried Nora, "did you see the ghost, oh, did you?"

Aunt Margery looked vaguely at the girl, as though striving to collect her thoughts.

"My child," said she, putting her hand on Nora's head, "your sister taunted you just now with having no Everleigh blood. Lenore, thank God every day of your life that you have more of the traits of your mother's family than of your father's. Be anything but an Everleigh. It is a bad blood—a hot, fiery blood—that sooner or later has brought destruction to all in whose veins it flowed."

"Margery!" cried Mrs. Everleigh, in a tone of dread, from the depths of her easy-chair.

"It is the truth, Eva," said Margery, with a hard sternness in her voice, very unlike her usual emphatic energy; "don't blind yourself to the fact. The only salvation there is for these children is to tell them the truth."

"That is just what I want to know," exclaimed Vashti, facing her aunt; "you are always throwing out these remarks. Now, I want to know what this dreadful truth is. I am sure I am old enough to know it, whatever it is."

Margery noticed her only with a scarcely perceptible curl of her pallid lip, never moving her eyes from her sister's face.

Mrs. Everleigh looked up, and with an expression of timid deprecation in her mild eyes, said:

"I wish, Margery, you would tell them about Roscoe—about—about—Neil Roque."

Margery turned abruptly away, the cloud darkening upon her face.

"About papa?" exclaimed Vashti and Nora, in a breath.

"Tell them yourself, Eva," said Margery, in a low voice.

"I should like to so much if I thought it was suitable," said Mrs. Everleigh, her voice a little tremulous,

and a quiver of tears in her eyes. "I fancied somehow that you might not like it."

"I not like it? What if I didn't?" said Margery, taking a step toward her. "Why shouldn't I like it? The sooner it is told the better."

She was leaving the room, but turned back again, saying, almost fiercely:

"Tell them withal, it was his own terrible, ungovernable temper that wrecked him. Tell them it was no fault of his that he did not kill the man; that he was mad with anger; that it is an Everleigh trait to get beside one's self with rage—Heaven forgive me, Eva!"

Mrs. Everleigh had fainted.

Margery took her in her arms tenderly, as though she had been an infant, and Nora ran within for water. The poor lady opened her eyes ere long, but she did not attempt to speak, resting her head on her sister's shoulder, and smiling feebly, as Margery dropped kisses on her face. Margery sat a little, and then she lifted the fragile, attenuated form, carried her in, and laid her on the bed. She did not raise her head from the pillow all day.

All the forenoon Vashti lingered about the porch, or in sight of her mother's door, a wistful look in her strange, shadowy eyes—banished from the room, for Mrs. Everleigh was very ill—one of those nervous attacks to which she had been subject since her invalid days, and must be kept very quiet.

At last, late in the afternoon, she discovered, by peering through the blind, that her mother was alone. Stealing swiftly round to the door, she lifted the latch and entered noiselessly. Mrs. Everleigh lay with half-closed eyes, scarcely seeming to breathe. Vashti dropped on her knees

at the bedside, saying, in a scarcely audible whisper, "Mamma."

The invalid stirred a little; the next moment Vashti was hurried swiftly and in silence from the room.

"There!" said Margery Gresham, in a decided but still kindly tone, as she loosed her in the great hall; "don't go in there again. It is the first time your mother has slept to-day, and she must not be disturbed."

"When can I see her?" said Vashti, earnestly. "Can I see her when she wakes?"

"No; I hope you will be in bed before that time."

"Shall you be with her?"

"Certainly—all night."

"Aunt Margery!"

She stopped, her cheeks flushing, and her eyes full of tears.

"Well?"

"I was cross to mamma this morning. Won't you tell her, as soon as ever she wakes, that I am very sorry?"

Margery Gresham looked down upon her impassioned face with a softening glance, saying, half to herself:

"After a storm comes a calm. You'll rage as bad as ever the first time she crosses you in word or deed. Repentance is not good for much, when it leaves no more lasting impression than that. Better wait till she is well enough for you to tell her yourself. True repentance is of slow growth with those of your kind, child. I dare say you are sorry you grieved your mother, but she would far rather you were sorry you were angry."

"How do you know but that I am?" was Vashti's passionate exclamation.

"There, you are angry now. Sorry, indeed!" and Margery turned away and left her.

Vashti looked after her a moment, her face distorted with passion, and then, dashing herself down on the lowest step of the stairway, she burst into convulsive sobs.

Presently came Bute, and crouched at her side, with a low whine of sympathy. She did not notice him, but cried on, her whole frame racked with her agitated weeping.

In a little while came Nora, the skirt of her small, white apron gathered up in her two hands, and heaped with luscious peaches. She was caroling lightly to herself as she skipped in at the open door.

She stopped when she saw Vashti, saying:

"Have a peach, Ti? I've found some rare fine ones. I'm going to take some to Aunt Margery—they're the kind she likes."

"Don't ask me to eat anything Aunt Margery likes—I hate her."

"Hum! What's up now—you and Aunt Margery been diverting yourselves again?" said Nora, coolly biting a peach.

Vashti made no reply, and Nora, resuming her song, went to find her aunt.

Vashti's sobs became gradually quieted, her passion had spent itself; and, as Bute licked her hand, she caressed him with it softly. Sitting there in the gathering twilight, with swollen eyes and an aching head, she felt very miserable—too miserable for words—so that when Miss Gresham, coming through the hall to go to her own room, ordered the dog out of the hall, in those tones that usually roused the tempest in Vashti's rebellious heart, she let him go, and got up to suffer her aunt to pass, going away to her own room afterward, silently, but with her heart very bitter.

The appointments of both it and Nora's, were marked by exceeding purity and fitness. The carpets and walls, seen by daylight, were of that peculiar shade of blue, which harmonizes so well with the pink cheeks of childhood. The draperies of the room were snowy ; there were two or three statuettes, two or three pictures on the walls, as pure and lovely in expression and conception as the heart of the mother who selected them.

Vashti entered her room forlorn enough. The moon-beams came through the open shutter, and cast a "glamour" over each delicate feature, so suggestive of her mother's love. Unconsciously to herself, the influence of that beautiful room on Vashti was always good, and her spirit grew subdued as though in the presence of her good angel. She sat a few moments by the window, and then, having slowly undressed, she laid her head on her pillow sighing.

And so she fell asleep, and waked just as a little French timepiece, in the next room, chimed musically the hour of midnight. She woke with a start and a shiver, a vague oppression on her heart, as one is apt to have who sleeps with a troubled spirit. Slipping from the bed with a sudden impulse, she went noiselessly to her mother's room.

"I can look at her," she said to herself, and so she stole softly into the room by Aunt Margery, looking like a spirit in her white robes and bare feet.

Miss Gresham did not look up. She was sitting with her back to the door, buried in thought that seemed unpleasant, for she sighed often and deeply. Vashti stood in the shadow of the bed draperies, wondering if her mother was asleep, when Mrs. Everleigh's soft voice said:

"Margery?"

Margery came in an instant.

"I should like a little fresh water, please—water from the spring. I believe I could sleep then."

Away went Margery to get the water, and Vashti flew round to her mother, saying eagerly, and choking with tears:

"Mamma, I am so sorry. I couldn't sleep till I told you."

"My darling! Your aunt told me. I was pleased to hear it. Kiss me—there; go to bed, dear; your aunt is coming;" and Vashti, her lips fragrant with the kiss of forgiveness, stole back to her room on winged feet. At the bedside, she dropped on her knees now, and went to sleep after, to wake in the morning with smiles curving her rosy mouth, and transfiguring her face, as smiles always did.

CHAPTER V.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

Just as the day was breaking Margery Gresham left her sister's room. She had not slept for two nights, and looked haggard and miserable as she crossed the hall with a slow step, unusual for her, whose carriage and demeanor were generally so expressive of her energy of character. On the landing at the top of the stairs, she met Philip Bryce, a large empty basket on his arm, and a bunch of keys in his hand.

He stopped when he saw her, setting the basket down, and leaning upon the banisters with an expression on his face as though he expected to be addressed. He was a

large, stalwart-looking man, over fifty, but appearing younger—a servant of the family before Margery Gresham had ever heard of Everleigh.

She lifted her heavy eyes to his face, regarding him sadly.

"Come into my room, Philip; we can't talk here."

He followed her silently.

"Well," said she, sinking wearily into a chair, "what is the conclusion of the whole matter?"

"He is about the same, miss, and the doctor advises to let things rest as they are as long as possible. He could not be in better hands, and he says it is certainly for the happiness of all concerned that things should remain just as they are."

"Well, well, I don't know but he is right. Mrs. Everleigh is so nervous she won't suffer that subject to be approached without a terrible agitation. I only touched upon it this morning indirectly, and she has one of those attacks of hysteria in consequence. But it doesn't seem to me I can live on in this way. Philip, another such a day and night as the last two have been, and it seems to me I should —should be as he is."

"Dear Miss Margery, you will feel better after a little. It is the shock of this news and want of sleep. Do try to think it was no fault of yours. You have kept us all up so far, don't faint now."

"If I only, only knew that the drug had nothing to do with it."

"Miss Margery, if anything I could say would convince you, I would say it; I am perfectly satisfied that it would have been so at any rate. It was in his blood. It is the Everleigh doom!"

"I don't believe it," she cried, impatiently; "I can't ac-

cept this talk about doom. The doctor says it was not the drug, and I must try to believe him. But, Philip, mark my words. The curse of the Everleighs is worldly prosperity and a temper that they have been suffered to indulge. If I live long enough, these children shall know what I think of this matter. They shall not go headlong to a destruction prepared by their own unwarned hands, if I can help it."

She had leaned toward him from her seat, her gray eyes darkening from excess of feeling as she spoke, and her animated hands emphasizing her speech with eager gesture.

He shook his head.

"It won't do any good, Miss Margery. You're not the first one that has tried to save 'em from their fate; but it always overtakes them sooner or later. They're a winsome set, ma'am, with all their head-strongness. They always go their own gait, in spite of everything, but when the gust is over, they come to you with such a sorrowful, melting look in their eyes one can't resist it. It's the best and worst blood ever was—this Everleigh blood."

He bowed himself out of the room, and Margery, loosening her braided hair with a heavy sigh, lay down to try and sleep.

* * * * * *

"Where are you going, Vashti?" said Nora, as her sister passed her, going down the road on a run.

"To meet Miss Dale. Philip says the carriage has gone to Hart Corners for her. Won't you go?"

"Not I. I get enough of Miss Dale at common times."

Vashti resumed her run, and Nora continued an interesting game with her inseparable Bute. She was still romping with him when a carriage drove slowly up to the house by another road from the one Vashti had taken.

The driver got down and opened the door for his passenger to alight. A military-capped head emerged from the depths of the close and rather ponderous vehicle. Below the cap a pair of bright, frankly-pleasant eyes flashed a look not altogether strange over the scene. A rather slender form in a military coat followed. He had barely put his foot upon *terra firma*, when Bute leaped upon him, almost throwing him down, licking his face and his hands, leaping about him and over him, with the most extravagant demonstrations of joy.

Not at all disconcerted by this rough welcome, the new-comer laughed and snapped his fingers at the huge shaggy fellow, while the driver stood with his eyes like saucers, saying:

"That dog must a seed you afore, sir."

The stranger laughed again with quiet zest, and taking off his cap, looked sharply about him. A little way off was Nora, coming slowly toward him with a look of inquiry on her face. She was diminutive and graceful as a fairy, as she stood poised on slender foot, her coral lips apart.

An instant she stood thus, shading her brown eyes with her hand, a shimmer in them like the twinkle of stars, and then, like an arrow shot from a bow, she flew to him, crying:

"I knew you would come; I knew you would come."

He took her face in his hands as she clung to him, and gave her two or three laughing kisses, saying:

"And how did you know that?"

"Because I wanted you to so much. I have said your name over to Bute every day, all this while. Leon—Leon Brown—Lee——"

"Bute hasn't forgotten me either, it seems," said he. "He walks as well as ever, for aught I can see."

"Oh, better, sir, better," said Nora, eagerly. "Bute, Bute, it's Leon Brownlee, isn't it? Love him, old fellow."

The dog rose immediately on his hind feet, standing quite to Leon's shoulder, and made a comical attempt to encircle his neck with his paws, while Nora, with a triumphant look, said:

"I told you so."

Leon laughed heartily, and holding Nora's hand, went slowly toward the house, just as Vashti, having missed the carriage, rushed up to it, crying:

"Has Miss Dale come?"

"Not as I knows on, miss," said the driver.

"Didn't you go after her?"

"No, miss; I went after that young gent as is with Miss Nory. She was downright glad to see him, too. He's some relation o' yer Aunt Mag'ry, I calc'late, from suthin' he said. But I never seed him afore to-day, I know."

"Some relation of Aunt Margery's?" queried Vashti to herself, as she went thoughtfully to the house; "then I don't want to see him."

Nora piloted him in, learning to her delight that he was a son of a cousin of Aunt Margery's, and had come to see her, and spend several weeks. She left him in one of the parlors off the hall, and went to find her aunt.

Elise was still with Mrs. Everleigh, who was sitting up for a little while. Margery was not with them. She hesitated at the door of her aunt's room, lest she might still be sleeping; but hearing a movement within, she knocked.

Margery Gresham herself opened the door, brush in

Frank, all the lordly airs gone out of him, crest-fallen and subdued, his black eyelashes heavy with tears, as he came shyly into the room.

"I was very rude to you, sir, a little while ago," he said, lifting his dark, bright eyes to Leon, and holding out his hand with that seductive grace of which Philip had spoken to Margery Gresham. "I beg your pardon, sir."

"My dear boy," cried Leon, taking Frank's hand in both of his, and drawing him to a seat, "I like you better than though it never had happened; for else, I should not have learned what a fierce, brave fellow you are. It is brave and noble to acknowledge when one is in fault, Frank. You're a boy after my own heart. Frank Roscoe Everleigh, I like you."

Two or three deep, girlish blushes flitted over the boy's face at Leon's ardent expressions, and he sat in silent, but evident pleasure, while Leon dressed for dinner.

Leon looked curiously, as they met Nora in the hall, to see if these two felt amicably to each other. Apparently they did, for Nora came tripping toward them, saying, in her pretty arch way:

"Eh, Frank, you're trying to cut me out, now."

In the dining-room were Vashti and Miss Gresham.

"Leonidas, this is Vashti Everleigh," was the ceremonial of introduction which Miss Gresham deigned to take them through; and feeling the bitterness in her aunt's voice, Vashti conceived it to be her duty to be suddenly very affable to the young gentleman.

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"You wanted to ask me what it was about your papa, didn't you?" said Miss Gresham, with a vein of tenderness running through her cold tones.

Vashti nodded, and covered her face with her hands.

Miss Gresham shivered a little, as though she was cold, though the day was a warm one, and sinking her voice a little, said:

"Your father was not a murderer, after all. That man—Neil Roque—was not killed. I saw him day before yesterday, and he told me how it was, and all about it. That is all, Vashti."

The child lifted her face, her sensitive spirit in arms, and said, with a tone of haughtiness:

"No; it's not all, Aunt Margery. What was it you said to mamma that made her so ill? Tell it to me. It will not make me ill."

"I don't know, it might," said Miss Gresham, drawing herself up; "you've a stormy spirit, Vashti."

"Tell me," she cried, the tears bursting forth again. "Oh, I'm not angry now; I am only wild to know what you meant."

tounding declaration, catching a twinkle in Leon's eye, her gravity quite lost its equilibrium, and she burst into such a laugh that Leon, unable to resist the contagion, followed suit with a chorus that put Frank's handsome face all in a blaze. As soon as Nora could stop laughing long enough, she said, with her dimpled arm upon her brother's neck:

"It was just a slip of the tongue, dear. I heard Philip telling it too. It was just two pounds and thirteen ounces the pear weighed."

"Have it your own way," said Frank, angrily flinging her arm off; "since you've got me in here to laugh at, I guess I'll go."

And off he marched, his eyes in a flame and his head haughtily erect.

Leon and Nora looked at each other, very much confounded, but the whole affair touched their bump of fun so keenly that they laughed again more heartily than before.

Frank heard them, and fairly gnashed his white teeth with anger, as he strode through the hall.

Just at this juncture Miss Gresham made her appearance, looking cloudy and stern.

"You can go, Nora," she said, pointing to the open door, as she extended a very civil but very cold hand to Leon.

Nora looked up with a surprised expression.

Miss Margery did not deign to speak again, but waved her hand imperatively to the door, and with a half rebellious look, Nora left the room.

Leon Brownlee resumed the seat he had left to greet Miss Gresham with a ludicrous air of resignation. She sat in dignified silence several seconds. At last, throwing up his head with a droll glance, Leon said:

"I say, Cousin Margery, it strikes me you are not particularly glad to see me."

"Indeed? Then it strikes you correctly. I intended to send for you in a month or two. I did not want you now, as I wrote."

"And why, pray?" said Leon, with cool serenity.

"Because I did not. My reasons are my own, and good ones, as you may find one day to your cost. Whatever put it into your head to come at all, I can't conceive."

"Can't you give a fellow credit for a little natural affection for his kindred?"

"Pshaw! Leonidas, don't pretend you came to see me, when I so plainly gave you to understand that I did not want you. What did you come for, though? What could induce a gay young fellow like you to leave the town for an old castle of a country house, with no society but two old women, one sick, and the other worse, and a set of youngsters that do nothing but murder time?"

"Very complimentary you are, I must confess. This old castle of a country house strikes me as a very charming place. I have never seen its equal. Besides, I hear you have a ghost here. It would be just like me to come down on a tour of exploration."

A gray pallor swept over Miss Gresham's face at these last words.

"Be careful how you explore here, Leon Brownlee!" she cried, with a ring in her voice like the clashing of steel. "Let me come upon your foot outside of the daily beaten track at Everleigh, and I will have you put out as quick as I would a blood-hound! Neither kith nor kinship shall save you."

She had risen; her tall form shook like an aspen, and

her words rushed forth like an angry torrent. The young man looked at her in astonishment.

"Cousin," he said, gravely, "I did not know it was a sore subject; pardon me, I was only joking."

"It's not a sore subject! There is no ghost at Everleigh. Let what will come, I won't countenance that ridiculous tale," she said, half to herself, "and once for all, Leonidas, I am no subject for a joke. Speak your plain mother tongue when you talk with me—yea, yea, and nay, nay—whatever is more than this, is especially disagreeable to me."

He did not answer, and both sat in grave thought a short time.

"Leonidas," she exclaimed, fixing her eye upon him, "I wish you would go right back home again."

"Cousin, I'll be so good if you'll let me stay. I won't meddle nor make mischief—I'll be propriety itself. I want to stay—that's the long and short of it."

"What for?" she said, in her hard tones.

"Because—well, because, if you must know, I was by here three years ago, and I took such a liking for the place and the folks, that I determined to come again some day; and in pursuance of that determination, I am here. I did not suppose your objection to my coming was anything serious."

"Three years ago! That was when you ran away from home and went soldiering. Leonidas, don't tell me you were here, that—dreadful day!" she said, excitedly approaching him.

"Indeed then, but I was. What of it?"

She controlled herself with a violent effort. Evidently a torrent of words was on her tongue. To her anxious mind, this young, dashing, careless fellow, was an object of es-

pecial dread. She knew him of old—how "he cared for nothing and nobody" in the way of intimidation—how, from his childhood, he had the most wonderful fondness for peering about old caves, and dark, dungeony places. She had her own reasons for not liking that he should pursue his explorations at Everleigh. Miserable as she was in mind and body, to the extreme of nervousness, the prospect she pictured as before her was almost beyond endurance. She began, however, to realize that her conduct and language must excite strange thoughts; and so forcing herself to be silent, she sat still till she could speak calmly.

"Leonidas," she said, almost sadly, "I feel ill; I am scarcely able to be on my feet at all. I hardly know what I am saying part of the time, but believe me when I say that I have good and sufficient reasons for not wanting you here. What they are you shall know some day. Now oblige me by making your stay as short as possible."

"May I stay a week?"

She shook her head.

"Three days?"

"Well, three days be it," she said, rising. "I will send Philip to show you to your room."

When Philip came and marshaled him out of the parlor, he found Nora hanging about the hall, with a rather downcast look in her brown eyes. She brightened up a good deal when she saw Philip taking his portmanteau up stairs. Evidently she had been afraid Aunt Margery was going to send him off. He put his hand lightly on her head, with a reassuring glance and smile, as he passed her, and she stood looking after him, smiling too.

Leon had scarcely found himself alone in the room to which Philip had taken him, when there came a faltering tap at his door. Upon opening it, there stood Master

Frank, all the lordly airs gone out of him, crest-fallen and subdued, his black eyelashes heavy with tears, as he came shyly into the room.

"I was very rude to you, sir, a little while ago," he said, lifting his dark, bright eyes to Leon, and holding out his hand with that seductive grace of which Philip had spoken to Margery Gresham. "I beg your pardon, sir."

"My dear boy," cried Leon, taking Frank's hand in both of his, and drawing him to a seat, "I like you better than though it never had happened; for else, I should not have learned what a fierce, brave fellow you are. It is brave and noble to acknowledge when one is in fault, Frank. You're a boy after my own heart. Frank Roscoe Everleigh, I like you."

Two or three deep, girlish blushes flitted over the boy's face at Leon's ardent expressions, and he sat in silent, but evident pleasure, while Leon dressed for dinner.

Leon looked curiously, as they met Nora in the hall, to see if these two felt amicably to each other. Apparently they did, for Nora came tripping toward them, saying, in her pretty arch way:

"Eh, Frank, you're trying to cut me out, now."

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"Tell me," she cried, the tears bursting forth again. "Oh, I'm not angry now; I am only wild to know what you meant."

"I will tell you, Vashti. Come down the walk with me; there are too many ears hereabouts."

They walked silently a little distance from the house, and Miss Gresham resumed:

"Your father quarreled with that man about a trifle. He was angry before he met him, and was in a state similar to yours now. His spirit was in such a turmoil, that a word to him was like a spark of fire in a gunpowder magazine. Neil Roque spoke that word; the magazine blew up, and sent his soul to perdition!"

"Aunt Margery, you mustn't talk so about papa; it's not true," said Vashti, her eyes flashing.

"Didn't I tell you so?" said Miss Gresham, in unmoved tones; "you're a powder magazine, too. If you had a gun now, I don't know but you'd shoot me, just as your father did Neil Roque."

Vashti made a visible effort to control her fiery spirit, and Miss Gresham said:

"That is something like it. Keep cool; keep cool."

"Don't speak so to me!" cried the girl, with an impatient stamp of her foot. "I can't endure the way you talk to me."

"Your father couldn't endure the way Neil Roque talked, and so he shot him. It's a famous remedy, Vashti. Your father was dear to me as—your father was very dear to me." She paused, and a spasm of fierce agony contracted her features for an instant. "And yet, I tell you, that in his heart your father committed murder. Be quiet, child; you shall hear me. He meant at the moment he shot—not after nor before, but at the moment he shot—he meant to kill that man."

Vashti made frantic efforts to escape from her aunt's detaining hand. She loosed her hold as she uttered the

last word, and Vashti, covering her ears with her hands, fled to the house, crying, "It's not true; it's not true. Oh! it's not true;" while Margery, dropping on her knees among the rose-bushes, seemed to pray.

Later, late in the night, Margery Gresham came softly into Vashti's room, shading the lamp she carried with her hand. The girl's dark, beautiful face had a weary look, and her slender arms were tossed above her head in her restless slumber. Margery Gresham's stately head bent but a moment, and as she kissed the brow of the sleeper, Vashti's eyes flashed wide open upon her. "I would give my life for thee, child, if it would avail," dropped involuntarily from Margery's lips, and shading the light again, she vanished from the room ere the girl was fairly awake, so swiftly and noiselessly, that Vashti, falling immediately away into the arms of slumber, fancied in the morning that she had had a dream, and said to Mrs. Everleigh, who was sitting propped up with pillows in bed:

"I dreamed, mamma, that Aunt Margery kissed me, and said she would be willing to die for me."

"I believe she would, dear; you don't half know your Aunt Margery."

CHAPTER VI.

GOSSIP—EVERLEIGH ANTECEDENTS.

Miss Dale, for whose coming Vashti was so anxious, was a sort of maid to the two girls, Vashti and Nora. She attended to all the minor points of their supervision, such as Mrs. Everleigh's invalid life unfitted her for, and Miss Margery did not deign to meddle with.

Far from having any thoughts of returning to Everleigh at this particular time, she had come from her home in a distant town, and stopped over night at the house of a friend who lived a few miles from Everleigh; and on the evening of the day of Leon Brownlee's arrival, most comfortably ensconced in an easy-chair in that friend's sitting-room, she was whiling away the hours in gossiping chat.

Miss Dale was a rather pretty woman, short, stout, comely, and volatile, blue-eyed and ruddy-complexioned. Her friend, Mrs. Sparks, was thin, angular, sharp in feature and expression, with a keen eye and a long tongue.

"I tell you, Mrs. Sparks," said Miss Dale, surveying a remarkably closely-fitting gaiter; which she thrust from under the hem of her dress for that purpose, "life at Everleigh isn't what it is cracked up to be."

"Never heard it was cracked up to be much," said Mrs. Sparks, with her sharp nose in the air.

"Oh, they're such grand folks, you know; it is really like living in a nobleman's family, only it is so doleful. That Miss Margery is down on what she calls levity, and one is hardly suffered to smile in the house without getting a lecture for it. Miss Margery's lectures are short, but to the point, I can tell you."

"You know the saying," said Mrs. Sparks, scornfully—"'Set a beggar on horseback, and where'll he ride to?' Margery Gresham has no more right to lord it there than you and I have. They say the children don't hardly dare call their souls their own."

"Well, it is a good deal so. But, Mrs. Sparks, is it true that she's no relation to the family at all?"

"No more'n you and I; in reality, she's only Mrs. Everleigh's adopted sister. I never heard anybody deny

that. She's got the upper hand with Mrs. Everleigh somehow, and then she took that of the whole house. There used to be queer stories of her doings before Roscoe Everleigh died, you know."

"I've heard something of the kind—never anything definite. Now tell me all you know, Mrs. Sparks; I'm dying to hear."

Mrs. Sparks was in her element directly. Miss Dale settled herself a little more comfortably in her chair, and Mrs. Sparks began.

"They do say that Roscoe Everleigh waited on both them girls—Eva Stoner (that's Mrs. Everleigh) and Margery Gresham. But everybody thought he was going to marry Margery—he was a sight more attentive to her—when all at once he turned right round and married Eva. Margery didn't come near 'em for a long while; but when Mrs. Everleigh's last child was born, they say she begged so hard for her sister, as she calls her, that Miss Gresham—she had never married, though they say she had offers enough—Miss Gresham come right away, to see her, and she has never left her since. Mrs. Everleigh was a great hand for parties in them days; she just went and went all the time, and Margery took the whole charge of the house on her shoulders. Well, Margery used to rule the house, I can tell you. I know."

"She rules yet for that matter," remarked Miss Dale.

"I believe you, but in them days what made it so queer, the master and mistress of the house were both alive and well, and even Roscoe Everleigh himself never pretended to interfere with her. He was a mighty high-headed man, (they're awful high-tempered, all of them,) but he used to take the harshest language from Miss Gresham without a word. I've known a great deal of the family, first and last.

My Myra was nurse there once; and Myra has a wonderful knack of hearing; she can hear through the thickest doors. And so, while she was toting them children about, she used to hear some pretty queer things. Roscoe Everleigh used to have such spells, he was so fiery. If anything went a bit wrong, he'd fly into a passion and abuse everybody he came across, always excepting Margery Gresham. Whenever she came upon him in one of his furies he'd look just as though he thought he was caught.

"Once Roscoe Everleigh had a fuss with Philip Bryce. He had been out hunting, and was coming home through the orchard, with his gun on his shoulder, when he came across Philip. He was out o' sorts, and someway he got to high words with Philip, and threatened to shoot him. Mira was down there with Nora, and at the first words, scared a'most out o' her wits, she set Nora down in the clover, and scampered off up to the house, and burst in upon Margery Gresham, hollering that Mr. Everleigh was going to shoot Philip Bryce.

"Margery never asked a single question, only where were they, and flinging down her work, tore away like mad to the orchard, followed by Myra. Philip was trying to soothe him down, and apologizing for what he hadn't done, and Everleigh was a switching his gun about, and a prancing up and down for all the world like a mad bull.

"At sight o' Margery Gresham, he stopped as quick as though he'd been shot, and turning as white as a sheet, he dropped his gun right down there. Philip just made a bow and took himself off, glad of the chance. Myra said Miss Margery stood there a good bit, drawing her breath hard, and bitin' her lips to keep the words back. At last she kind o' jerked out:

"'You'll kill somebody some day, you madman!'

"'You've said it there, Margery,' says he. 'I'm mad if ever an Everleigh was. It runs in the blood. I'm only traveling the road the rest did!'

"Myra didn't stay much longer after that scene. She got awful scared besides at something she saw in that old part of the house that they call the Hermitage. They do say it's haunted, you know; and when she couldn't help screaming with the fright, Margery Gresham gave her such a goin' over that she came right away when that quarter was out, and I never could get her to go back. She always was sort o' timid, and she said she was afraid to live there; and between you and me, I believe she was fraider of Margery than she was of the ghost."

Mrs. Sparks paused, out of breath. Miss Dale had several times opened her lips to speak, but Mrs. Sparks talked on so fast that it was quite out of the question. Miss Dale was about to speak now, when Mrs. Sparks began again:

"You've been there ever since afore Roscoe Everleigh died, haven't you? That was the queerest affair. I'd give a great deal to know how that man died. Did you see him while he lay sick?"

"Indeed I did not," said Miss Dale, with energetic emphasis. They would not suffer a soul across the threshold but Miss Gresham, Philip, and the doctor. Mrs. Everleigh was too ill herself to try it, and as for the children, Miss Gresham kept them away easy enough, though they did make a terrible fuss about it."

"There's mighty dark stories told about that dyin'," said Mrs. Sparks, sinking her voice to a whisper. "Some folks, you know, would do most anything rather than have the disgrace of hangin' in the family, and he would have been hung certain, if he'd lived to stand his trial, though, to be sure, they say the man's turned up now, wasn't killed at

all; but that don't help him any, seein' he's dead. I'd just like to know how he died, though. One thing is certain, if there was anything unfair about it, Margery Gresham must have known of it. They say folks has seen his ghost at the Hermitage. Haven't you ever seen anything?"

Miss Dale shrugged her shoulders.

"It would be rather dangerous for me to tell what I've seen and heard. It might be the means of my losing my place."

"Oh, dear, I shouldn't tell, you know. It would be as safe with me as if you had never told it."

"Well, you must swear you won't tell it, though."

"Oh, never!"

"Well, I had been up in the loft reading some old novels. Whatever possessed me to come back by the Hermitage I don't know. There was another stairway, but come I did. The door that opens into the Hermitage from this is placed in the back of a large, dark recess. As I came by, I glanced, half frightened toward it. It stood wide open, and away down a long, narrow hall I saw a shape, a something, writhing along over the floor like a huge, great snake.

"I could feel the very hairs of my head quake, and I was thinking that never in all my life had I seen, or heard, or read of a snake like this. Why, Mrs. Sparks, it was as large round as an ox, and I could hear a kind of grating noise, like something heavy dragged over the floor, when it writhed itself along. Imagine, if you can, what I must have felt when that crawling thing lifted from the floor a face—not a human face, oh, no; it seemed to me the face of a devil. I thought I should have died; and as I fancied it was coming toward me, I screamed, as you never heard anybody, and ran, perfectly beside myself, toward the land-

ing. Before I got there I ran against Margery Gresham, standing right in my path, and looking only less terrible than that creature I had seen.

"'What is all this?' she says, as I came to a dead halt.

"I stammered out something about what I had seen, and her face turned as white as that counterpane. She just took hold of me and set me down in a chair, ran past me and shut the door of the Hermitage, and was back again like a flash of lightning.

"'You're a ridiculous coward,' she said, savagely; 'I advise you to take the other stairway if you are afraid of hobgoblins.'

"'I certainly shall,' I said, as I hurried away, more dead than alive. I haven't hardly got over my fright yet, and I wish from the bottom of my heart that old Hermitage was burned down."

"Well," said Mrs. Sparks, "it's an awful queer house, and an awful queer family in it. Did you ever think how strange it is, all of 'em dyin' the way they do? They can't even die like common folks. I am sure I shouldn't want to be descended from a lord like them, if I had to take their chances in life, too."

Miss Dale looked up curiously.

"Didn't you never hear about that?" says Mrs. Sparks. "Dear me! Well, I believe there is only a few of us old settlers does know about that. You see, them Everleighs always, as far as I know, die in a queer way—kind o' mysterious like. Now, there was Roscoe Everleigh's father; he was mighty high strung, but a wonderful handsome fellow.

"He married a good piece away from here. Folks said she was an orphan. She was a mighty delicate, snowy-lookin' creature, no bigger than my Jane there, with the wonderfullest eyes, just the color of a wild vi'let; but she

was so bashful and timid-like, you couldn't only now and then get a sight at 'em. She had such a pretty way of carryin' her head, too.

"Poor thing! they say she had a hard time of it, and she died wonderful sudden. You see her husband used to have just such queer spells as they all do, and he'd go foaming round like all possessed—and Mrs. Everleigh, when he got that way, and came on her with that temper o' his, she just fell right down in a heap on the floor, all of a dead faint.

"She died finally, about a year after they was married. He'd been a havin' one o' his high times; I don't know how it was, but Aunt Mercy always said she believed he struck her. She heard her scream, and ran as quick as ever she could, and there she was, a lyin' on the floor, with the blood just a pourin' out of a great hole in her head, where she'd hit it, as she fell, against a little marble image that stood on one side of the door. Her husband stood a starin' at her out o' his great wild eyes, and a shakin' like an ague. When they lifted her onto the bed, they said he just crowded himself behind the door, and curled all up in a heap, chatterin' and gibberin' to himself like an idiot. Bimeby he crept out o' the room, stoopin' like an old man. Nobody followed him, or said a word to him. Well, that was in the mornin'; and afore night there was the beautifulest pair of twin boys born, and the pretty lady mother was dead.

"Mr. Everleigh never seen his wife again, after he crept gibberin' out of the room that mornin'. They found him lyin' afore the door of the Hermitage, just alive, and that was all. He'd had a stroke of palsy, and one side o' him was as dead as a stone. It really looked like a judgment, now didn't it?

"He got a good deal better after awhile, so he could mumble a few words, that nobody but Philip Bryce could

understand. They had a chair made for him, to run on wheels, and he got so he could go everywhere except up and down stairs. He lived till the twins was fourteen, a handsome, harum scarum pair as ever was. He was getting better every year, and some thought he might a got well entirely; but I don't know. As he got better, he got sourer and sourer, and one day they found him close by the door of the Hermitage, with the blood drippin' out o' his mouth onto the floor, stone dead. The doctor said he'd burst a blood vessel; but I'd like to know if people burst blood vessels a sittin' still in a chair. Some folks thought he'd seen a ghost, and tried to run away. Anyway it was mighty queer. Don't you think so?"

Miss Dale nodded, and said:

"What became of the twin brother of Roscoe Everleigh? I've heard hints, and some of the servants told me an odd story about him. Did you hear about that, Mrs. Sparks?"

"Yes, that was as queer as the other. You've heard tell, I suppose, that there is two rooms in that old Hermitage, that it's as much as one's life is worth, to go into. They say nobody ever went into 'em, and came out alive. Well, this youngster, they called him Frank, I believe; he was the youngest of the twins—a wonderful bold, reckless boy—and when he heard about them two rooms, nothin' would do him but he must try 'em, and they found him one day under the window of one of them rooms, a lyin' on the grass outside, with his neck broke. Some of 'em tried to make out that he'd tried to climb in at the window and made a misstep and fell. But some others, that had as good a chance o' knowin', said that the big up-stairs door of the Hermitage was found unlocked that day, and the key in it; and I know good, respectable folks, that thought it

kind o' strange that Frank Everleigh should climb either in or out of that window, when he could just as well used the door. He must have spirited the key away from Philip Bryce, who kept it, and gone into the Hermitage by the door. Some thought he might have heard somebody comin', and tried to get out of the window. I doubt it though. Frank Everleigh wa'n't no such o' scary person as that."

"They're a very singular family," says Miss Dale, taking a deep inspiration, and looking half frightened at the dark corners of the room. "There don't a day pass but something happens out o' the common line. Why, when I get away, it seems like living in another world. Only the day before I came away this time, that was three weeks ago, I was walking in those grounds back of the Hermitage, when at a turn in the walk, I stumbled right on Doctor Gracie, coming away from the house. He looked a good deal flurried, and he had his case of surgical instruments with him. He made a bow, and an apology, and was hurrying on, when I called to him to ask if anybody was hurt at the house.

"'No,' he said, 'no, he had just called a minute, as he went by, to see Ellen.'

Ellen Gracie was visiting there. I thought no more about it then, but latter in the day I heard Miss Gracie wishing she could see her father, Doctor Gracie. She wanted to go home.

"'Didn't you see him this morning?' I said.

"'No,' she answered. 'I thought he might come for me to-day, but he hasn't yet.'

"'Probably you were not up when he came. He was here this morning,' I said.

"'Impossible!' she exclaimed. 'I was up very early.'

"'I rather think I know Doctor Garcie,' I said, smiling. 'I certainly saw him or his ghost this morning.'

"'Miss Gresham! Oh, Miss Gresham!' she called to that lady across the hall, 'Miss Dale says papa was here this morning! Why didn't I see him?'

"Miss Gresham turned round with one of her jerks, and looked at me with her sharp eyes as though she would look me through; and if ever I saw anybody look frightened she did. She didn't look so but a minute, though, and then she said, in her aggravating way:

"'Miss Dale is given to seeing sights.'

"I was angry at this, and I said:

"'Miss Gresham, I certainly did see Doctor Gracie in the grounds behind the Hermitage this morning early, and I spoke with him.'

"'And what did the spirit say?' she says, sarcastically.

"'Doctor Gracie said,' I replied, 'that he had stopped a minute to see his daughter. He looked in a great hurry, and had his case of surgical instruments with him.'

"'How did you know they were surgical instruments?' she asked.

"'I have often seen the case,' I said, 'at his house. I know it perfectly well.'

"She gave me another of those sharp, startled looks, and then turning away, said, coldly:

"'It's possible he did call, Ellen, but not finding you readily, was in too much hurry to wait. I'll inquire.'

"A little after, as I was doing a bit of sewing for Miss Gracie, Miss Gresham came into my room, and said:

"'Your father did call, Ellen, but he was in a hurry, as I thought.'

"All the while she was saying it she kept her sharp eyes on me, not on Miss Gracie, and then she went away.

Toward night the doctor came with a carriage for Miss Ellen, and happening to be on the steps, I saw Miss Gresham run out of a doorway, nearer to him than I was, and tell him something before he came in, to which he nodded his head. Now, I'm not so great a fool, perhaps, as Margery Gresham thinks. I can, at least, put two circumstances together; and I am very well satisfied that she knew the doctor had been there at the very time Ellen Gracie asked her, and that somehow she and the doctor had a secret understanding. Why should he be sneaking off the back way, through the grounds of the Hermitage, if not to avoid being seen by prying eyes? I know there is some secret between those two."

"The doctor is a widower," remarked Mrs. Sparks, sententiously.

"Pshaw! it's nothing of that kind. Those two were always awful thick, and if they had wanted to marry, they have had plenty of chances. No, it is nothing of that kind."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SEARED HEART.

When Leon Brownlee came down from his room, early the morning after his arrival at Everleigh, it was raining. Murky clouds were scudding across the sky, and the atmosphere without was full of a fine, soaking rain. A wet, soggy, depressing air everything had outside, and inside he somehow fancied it looked dreary, too. The great hall-door, which always stood open when the weather would permit, was closed.

Shivering with a vaguely dismal feeling, he passed down the hall to find the sitting-room in which he had spent the evening before. Bewildered with the darkness and the different entrance ways that presented themselves, he could not decide which was the right one, but plunged down one at a venture. About midway of this another crossed it at right angles. More and more confused, he took the one to the left, and pursuing it for a little, bethought himself that he had better retrace his steps ere he became completely lost, which he began to suspect he was, in this queer tangle of halls. But, worse and worse. In attempting to return, he made another wrong turn, which led him on a way that grew darker as he proceeded.

Suddenly hearing steps near, he perceived that he was opposite a door, and congratnlating himself that he had at last found the room he was in search of, he put his hand upon the latch to enter. At the same moment, from the other side, a key turned in the lock, and the door opening, revealed Margery Gresham.

She started upon seeing him, and her face flushed crimson, and then faded to death palor. She pushed through, however, putting him back into the hall, dashing the lamp she carried on the floor, and closing and locking the door with trembling eagerness.

This done, she turned to the astonished gentleman, her face alternating with flush and pallor, and her deep gray eye like the eye of a stag at bay.

"Didn't I warn you?" she says, lifting her shaking hand; "didn't I tell you, Leonidas, that I would have none of your scenting game in this house? You have got to learn, boy, that I am sole and absolute mistress here, and I will not have you meddling."

Leon looked at her in amazed incredulity. The whole

affair struck him as supremely ridiculous, and he said, with a light laugh:

"I haven't the least idea what you are raving about, Cousin Margery. I think, as you told me yesterday, you must be ill. You talk like a person in a delirium. You are ill"—taking her hand, which she snatched angrily from him—"your hand is parched now with fever. Come away; come away. You are certainly very ill."

"I believe I am," she said, clasping her head with her two hands; "my brain seems as if on fire. What was it you said about—about a secret?"

Convinced now that she was talking in the delirium of a fever, Leon again attempted to lead her away; but she flung his hand from her arm more passionately than before.

"I know what you are after," she cried; "I know. You want to find out if I have a secret, and then you'll hunt me down. But I am equal to you; yes, I am, sick or well. Let me tell you, sir, I have a secret—yes, sir; but hands off. It's like molten metal; you can't touch it without getting burned. Ah! woe is me; it sears my heart."

She leaned against the wall, seeming to meditate for a little, and then, sudddenly raising her head, she said, with something of her usual manner:

"I am ill; very. Go, quick, and bring Philip Bryce to me. Mind, not another soul, only Philip."

He was starting away, when she cried:

"Stay, let me lean on you; I can perhaps get to my own room."

She leaned heavily on his shoulder, directing him by a gesture of her hand which way to go, but when they reached

the great hall, sat down, shivering and deathly white, upon the stair step, saying:

"It is no use, I can get no farther; go, quick, for Philip —quick, I must speak with Philip."

"Fortunately, Philip at that instant was crossing the hall from the dining-room. He came right to them; his kindly, but usually rather sad face contracting with pain, as he saw how ill Miss Gresham looked. She smiled feebly at him.

"I wanted to tell you something, Philip. Let me see— what was't—oh! if worse come to worse, Philip, trust him," with a wavering gesture at Leon.

The old man bowed, saying:

"Yes, yes, Miss Margery, I'll attend to everything," and to Leon, "we shall have to carry her to her room."

"Hush, will you," she said, angrily, "I am not so ill but I know what I am saying. I tell you, Philip, if worse comes to worse, this boy here—he's a wild, hair-brained young soldier, but his heart is a true one—there's metal in him."

Her voice died to an indistinct murmur; her head dropped to her breast; they approached to lift her, but as they touched her, her spirit flashed up again. She rose, wearily, it is true, and would toil, step by step, up the stairs. At the top, overtasked nature gave way, she reeled into their outstretched arms, and the two bore her moaning to her bed.

Elise came, Dr. Gracie came, and for weeks Margery Gresham was utterly unconscious of the things of this life. The doctor would suffer no one to approach her but Philip, his wife, and himself. The fever might be contagious, he said.

CHAPTER VIII.

SEED SOWN IN GOOD GROUND.

When Leon found himself at last in the sitting-room, that eventful morning, the cloth was laid there for breakfast.

"I ordered breakfast laid here, this morning," said Nora, turning from the glowing grate to greet him, as he entered. "The dining-room is so gloomy of a rainy day—and such a gloomy day as it is. Everleigh is a very dismal place, when it rains, sir."

Vashti and Frank came in soon.

"Did you know Aunt Margery was ill?" asked Nora, of her sister.

"One couldn't very well help knowing it," said Vashti, coldly. "The whole house is in a hurly-burly about it. I went up to see how bad she was; but she is as exclusive an invalid as papa was. Not a soul allowed in the room but Philip, Elise, and the doctor. It's the same old story."

"How you talk, Vashti!" spoke up Frank, with his pretty, boyish assumption of dignity; "you forget yourself."

"Forget who?" said Vashti. "I'm not talking for your ears, Sir Roscoe."

Frank's eye flashed, and he said, a little hotly:

"If you are talking for your own ears, you might have staid in your own room."

"Fie, now," exclaimed Nora, "let's have breakfast; breakfast is a great sweetener of temper, Aunt Margery says."

"Aunt Margery," mimicked Vashti, with a scornful curl

of her lip, and a half defiant glance at Leon, who stood silent by the fire. "Always Aunt Margery. I am tired of hearing her quoted, and I am glad this gloomy day is not to be made still gloomier by her frowning presence."

"For shame! for shame!" exclaimed Nora and Frank in a breath. "What makes you talk so?"

"Because I believe in telling the truth, that is why. Aunt Margery vexes me to death. I don't mean that I'm glad she's sick. I hope I'm not, that is, and I dare say she's not much sick; but I am glad of a chance of a day without her to order me around."

"You certainly do forget yourself," said Nora, going close to her sister, and speaking low. "You are behaving very rudely to a gentleman who is our guest, and Aunt Margery's cousin."

Vashti colored slightly, and stepping a pace toward Leon, said, stiffly, loooking coldly at him with her haughty eyes:

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"No, you don't," he said, with a grave smile, and bending on her a look that covered her face with burning blushes.

She turned confusedly away, and took her seat at the breakfast-table. The meal was a rather silent one by common consent. Vashti did not once lift her inky lashes during its progress, and her cheek still glowed when it was over. She was the first to rise from the table, and standing by her chair till Leon came near, she said, in a very subdued voice:

"I am sorry now, sir."

"I believe you," he said, bending to kiss her hand with profound respect.

She suffered him to do so, and more confused than before, left the room. The trio remaining took seats around

the fire, with now and then an indifferent word, till the breakfast things were removed.

The sitting-room, as Nora said, was pleasanter than the dining-room, being smaller, semi-circular in structure, with one bay window, which commanded, when the weather was clear, a fine view through a parting in the trees. On the ruddy-tinted walls were several pictures, all gems in their way; but over the marble mantel was one that few ever looked at without pausing in rapt contemplation before it.

It represented a young and very handsome man. The face—a striking one—was evidently that of an Everleigh, with something of the look Frank had, and a great deal of that of Vashti. The lines about the mouth were inexpressibly sweet and winning, but the eyes, which at the first glance you would have called merry, seemed, as they grew upon you, following you about the room, as pictured eyes do, to shine from depths—depths of sadness, of plaintive entreaty, it may be, but certainly of unutterable sorrow.

Leon gazed at it long, and his eyes falling from it, dwelt first upon the face of Frank, and wandered from that to Nora's. Her glance had followed his, and now, as it fell on her, she said:

"It is the way papa looked before he and mamma were married, only not always so sad. All his friends objected to it because of that, and the artist retouched the eyes a great many times. But he only made them look more and more sorrowful, and the picture was so perfect otherwise that it was very much admired. I have heard that—"

"Nora!"

It was Frank who spoke, in accents which seemed to say, as he had said to Vashti:

"You forget yourself."

Nora colored deeply, and was silent.

A short, embarrassed pause followed, and then Nora rose and left the room.

"My father, as I remember him, looked very much as that does," said Frank. "We are not a gay race, we Everleighs. Papa's eyes descended to him, and from him to us. Vashti and I have the same look often; and even Nora's eyes once in a while catch the same expression."

The boy arose as he spoke, and stood with his back to the mantel-piece. Unconsciously, at the same time, his black-lashed eyes took the very look of the picture, so that Leon started involuntarily. Frank was tall for his age, and now, with that singular, grave shadow in his face, he appeared much older than he was.

Leon liked to draw the boy out—to watch the play of his expressive and handsome features while he talked—and he said:

"*We Everleighs*, you say, Frank; your family is an old one, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," said Frank, unconsciously standing a little more erect.

The least bit of quiet amusement scintillated in Leon's keen eyes as he continued:

"How old is your family?"

"There is a book in the library, sir, that traces our descent from the time of William the Conquerer."

"Ah! You must have some rare old blood in your veins, young man. Do you suppose you are any better for it? Will it make you, unassisted by your own efforts, a great and good man?"

Leon spoke half in earnest, half jestingly, but was surprised to see the color flash like a ruby cloud over Frank's

face. The boy for an instant partially turned away from him, biting his lips fiercely, took two or three impatient steps toward the door, and, wheeling suddenly, said, with his eyes looking hotly through tears:

"I don't mean to be angry, sir—I don't want to be—but I can't help it when any one approaches that subject."

"My dear boy," said Leon, "I did not intend to hurt you. What I said to you I could have said just as appropriately to any other boy who prided himself upon his descent. I do think it is a little foolish to be proud of such things, but I did not mean to be personal, or grieve you."

"It's not that, sir. Indeed, I don't know but you are right about it being foolish to be proud of such a thing as a long descent. But it was not that I was so silly as to feel touched about; I thought you meant to warn me for fear——" He stopped, stammering and blushing. "Papa and grandpa were wild young men; I thought you meant something about that."

"I did not even know that it was so; you are too sensitive, Frank. If I wanted to talk with you on such a matter, I should not speak in the light strain I did then; and I should first exact a promise from you to take whatever I might say kindly."

At this moment Nora came in, and, lifting his eyes gratefully to Leon, without other reply, Frank left the room as Nora entered it.

Nora's usually sparkling face was graver than its wont. There was an almost imperceptible drooping of the corners of her mouth and eyes, as she came in and stood on the hearth, absently looking in the fire.

Leon watched her.

"These Everleighs" were a very fascinating study to him.

But particularly this one, drooping there at the fireside, in an altogether new mood, interested him. He thought she had a very sweet face; he liked the frank and outspoken fearlessness of her brown eyes; he liked the pretty sweep of her clustering curls about the roses and snow of her cheeks and brow. Watching her now, thoughtful upon the hearth, an irresistible desire seized him to know what she was thinking of. Crossing to where she stood, he suddenly prisoned both her fluttering hands in his.

"Lenore!" he said.

She lifted her dreamy eyes to his face.

"I want to make a contract with you. You said to me once that you wished you had a brother Leon Brownlee. I will be your brother, and you shall be my little sister. Is it a bargain?"

"I should like it very much, sir."

"Sir!" he interrupted her. "You must say Leon."

She smiled and nodded, but the smile was not her usual mirthful one.

He drew her away to the bay window, brought a cushioned chair, and ensconcing her therein, sat himself down near.

"Now," he said, "I want to know the meaning of this dreary little face?"

"If I could—if I might talk to you just as though you were my brother. The rest laugh at me, or get angry, except mamma, and she must not be worried."

"You may say anything you like to me."

"But they say I ask such foolish questions. Sha'n't I trouble you?"

"You need never fear troubling me; but you must decide in your own mind before you ask me, whether the question you are about to propose is a suitable one to

present to me. You know, Nora, there are some subjects that it would be quite unsuitable to mention outside of your own family."

She thought a little.

"Yes, sir; but I have heard people who did not belong to the family speak of these things, when they thought I was out of hearing or asleep. I always ran away, or stopped my ears, for I would despise being an eavesdropper; but I heard portions of what they said, for all that, and—I don't really think it would be wrong to tell them to you, if you will let me, and they bother me so, sir, you don't know.

"One day, soon after papa died, I was sitting in a thicket of grape-vines down the road, when some ladies passed. They had been up to the house for a call; but mamma was very ill, and Aunt Margery would not see them, so they had to go away without seeing anybody but Miss Dale, who received them. As they passed near me, I heard one say to the other, very spitefully, something about riches, and being stuck up, and about papa and a curse. I looked in the dictionary for that word, *curse*, for I wondered very much about papa dying, and thought maybe that had something to do with it, and I found it meant 'a wish of evil.' I have remembered it ever since, and thought a great deal about it. People don't give me much credit for thinking—they say I am a rattle-head—but I do think quite as much as some others. I have heard a great deal more since, on the same subject. Aunt Margery says our riches are our curse; but I don't think that was what those ladies meant. One day, when Miss Dale had a friend here, and they were looking at that picture," pointing to the one over the mantel, "I heard her friend say: 'He must have been thinking of that curse when that was painted.' Just then they saw

Vashti and me, and Miss Dale said 'Hush' to her friend. Vashti said she intended to know what they meant, and I believe she made Miss Dale tell her. But she always said 'chut' when I asked her if she knew, and called me a silly child. She would not tell me. Aunt Margery bids me be thankful that I am more a Stoner than an Everleigh—mamma was a Stoner—and when I ask her why, she says, 'Look at Vashti and Frank. Would I rather be either of them than myself?' Of course I would not; particularly at certain times. They are more fiery than I."

"Do you never get angry, Nora?"

"I wish I never did, sir; but I do—not so often as they, but very unreasonable, when I do. I don't know anything what I am about when I am angry. Miss Dale got frightened about a month ago, at a pretty pet bird of mine, and killed him. He escaped from his cage in the evening, and got into her room. She pretended she thought it was a bat. She is near-sighted, and a great coward. I missed him, and was looking for him. I found him in her room, she chasing him with a pillow. I called out to her that it was my bird, but she declared it was a bat, and threw the pillow at it with all her strength. He was quite dead when I got to him. The breath was literally knocked out of him, and I believe she did it on purpose. I was so angry that I have not got over it yet. I don't know what I did. I believe I smashed some china and gilt mandarins that were Miss Dale's especial delight, for I saw the pieces in the morning. I know I behaved dreadfully. Miss Dale was, or pretended to be, very much frightened, and went herself for Aunt Margery. I had cooled down a little when she got back, but I was still so excited that I could hardly stand for trembling. Aunt Margery bade me go right away to my own room; and when I did not

obey, she took me in her arms, and herself carried me there, struggling. The next day she talked with me about it, and told me the Everleigh temper was the Everleigh curse, and that I had more than she liked of it. So you see, I get no satisfaction from anybody. All this seems like great nonsense to me, but it annoys me."

She ceased speaking, and he sat in grave thought for a little while. At last she said, timidly:

"Have you nothing to say to me, Leon?"

She stumbled very prettily on the new appellation. He smiled slightly.

"Yes, a great deal; but I don't know where to begin. What you hear Miss Dale and people of her kind say, I should not mind. It is probably nothing but gossip. As for what your aunt says, I am afraid, Nora, she is right about temper. A bad temper is a curse, Nora."

"But you would not want one to have no temper, would you?" cried Nora.

"No; but better none than one not under complete control. I am afraid——"

He paused, looking thoughtfully at her.

"Shall I tell you the truth, just what I think?"

"Yes, sir, please."

"I am afraid that *you Everleighs* are a little too proud of your temper. No, not a little, but a great deal. I presume you are not conscious of it, but I am afraid, on self-examination, you would find it so."

Nora looked startled; her face burned with a deep, fiery blush, and in utter confusion, she covered it with her hands.

Leon got up, and crossing the room to the fire, stood a little while to give her time to recover herself. He was looking at the portrait over the mantel in vague thought,

when he felt her light touch upon his arm, and lifting her frank, young face, bathed in tears, she said:

"It is true, sir," and leaning against the wall, she cried again, quietly, but shedding profuse tears.

"My dear little sister," said he, putting his arm round her shoulders. "have I grieved you so much?"

"No, it is not you that grieved me, but the truth. I am so ashamed to find that it is so—that I have been proud of anything so wretched and bad. I have thought a thousand times that I would not be so fretful and cross as—as some people I know," she added, with a delicate reserve that did not hide from him that it was Vashti and Frank of whom she thought, "not for all the world; but I see now it was all vain glory. I am just as bad as they; and what is worse, sir, I don't see how I am to be any better. I am angry before I know it; and then I don't know anything what I am about."

"We read," said he, "that 'he that ruleth his own spirit, is greater than he that taketh a city.' If you are conscious of the magnitude of your undertaking, it is a great deal gained. It is never best to underrate the nature of any obstacle necessary to be overcome."

"But, sir, when I am angry, it seems to me so reasonable, so right, that I should be so, just for that time."

"That is the very danger, Lenore. I can tell you a rule that will keep you all right, even then. If your anger seems ever so reasonable, don't vent it at the time. Put your hand resolutely on your mouth, and say to your feet, 'To the right about; march!' Wait two hours, or even one, till you are quite cool, and then confer with reason. There is scarcely one time in five hundred when silence, or a soft answer, will not do the business better than a hurricane of fierce words; and, Nora, when Vashti wonders

why Miss Dale doesn't come, or praises her extravagantly, I wouldn't make any reply, if I were you, at least not a tantalizing one."

Nora's head dropped again, as she said, meekly, "Yes, sir." She remembered how the night before she had vexed Vashti terribly with an expression of her dislike for Miss Dale.

"It is these little transgressions," he continued, "that weaken the walls, so that when the enemy make a grand rush, they give way, and before you know it you are gone. There, now, I have read you quite a lecture," he said, gayly. "I think you and I need a little exercise, Nora; how shall we get it? I don't believe two or three turns down that road would hurt us, if it does rain. What do you say? Yes? Well, run and get a cloak and some thick shoes. No umbrella, mind you; we can't be cumbered with one."

She skipped away, and was back again in no time, bringing also his overcoat and cap.

They had a fine run, and came in just in time to get rested before dinner, which was also set in the sitting-room. Vashti and Frank were already there, looking quite the reverse of cheerful. Both glanced with a surprised air at Leon's and Nora's flushed cheeks and radiant eyes as they came in, laughing and chatting. Their good spirits proved contagious, and before dinner was over Frank was telling with infinite gusto about a hunting expedition of his on just such a day as this, and Vashti had twice curved her lips into the faint, sweet smile that transfigured her face, as moonlight does the plainest features.

After dinner, Leon paced to and fro across the room, Frank and Nora at either side, and Vashti standing in the

bay window. Won by the charmed conversation, however, she came gradually out of herself, and talked only as Vashti could, on subjects beyond the range of most children of her age. A graceful, and even brilliant chat it was, with Leon exercising his peculiar faculty for drawing out, till Vashti scarcely knew herself.

The afternoon passed more pleasantly than the morning had, and toward night Miss Dale came, greatly to Vashti's delight, pretending that she was just this day from home, and had traveled through the inclement weather, so anxious was she to get back to dear Everleigh and the darling children.

She covered Vashti with kisses, and would have done the same to Nora if she could have got beyond the cool tips of that young lady's fingers. Shook hands with and kissed Frank, declaring that he had grown a full inch while she had been gone; was charmingly deferential to Mr. Leon Brownlee, as introduced by Vashti; and having secured one of the most comfortable chairs in the room, proved to be in wonderfully fine spirits, Leon thought, for a lady who had traveled all day.

From the instant of her arrival she completely engrossed Vashti, and the pleasant little party seemed somehow quite broken up. In some indescribable way, Miss Dale monopolized them all, while at the same time, at least two, were not pleased with the proceeding.

To Leon, Miss Dale's vivacious style of usurping the conversation of the room, was unmitigated rudeness.

"Why didn't you take her down from her heights?' laughed Nora the next day. "You ought to see Aunt Margery do it. Aunt Margery can shut her up in a minute. She never has to look at her but once, and the dear woman is mum from that instant."

Miss Gresham was no better, and in consideration of this, Mrs. Everleigh's illness, and the presence of a visitor, Miss Dale postponed reopening school for a while.

Leon felt justified in prolonging his visit beyond the prescribed three days, under the circumstances, and his society proved of unspeakable value to Nora. The child had been, as it were, running to waste for lack of a genial companion.

The rainy weather continued for three weeks with slight intermissions. Leon, Nora, and sometimes, but not always, Frank, went on exploring expeditions from one end to the other of the habitable portion of the house, looking at rooms rarely used nowadays, quaintly furnished and quaintly decorated with stores of old-time gear that might have, and probably did, come over with that Lord Everleigh who had built the house.

In the attic, in turning over some of the hereditary spoils, they came upon a picture, with its face to the wall.

"It is Vashti's!" exclaimed Nora; "it was painted a year or two ago; but Vashti can't endure the sight of it; she says it looks more like a ghost than her, and she must have hid it up here. She looks very much like papa; don't you think so?" said Nora, turning it toward the light.

It was a very beautiful picture, but there was the same unfathomably sad look in the dusky eyes that characterized Roscoe Everleigh's picture down stairs.

"Yes," Nora said, replying to his glance, for he had not spoken. "Isn't it strange that they should have that look? Papa never liked his picture either, and always, till after he died, it hung with its face to the wall. After papa died, Aunt Margery had the picture hung in the dining-room first, and then she removed it to our sitting-room, because, she said, wherever we were most there it ought to be, and she bade us study it. I loved papa dearly, but when I

look at that picture, it makes my heart ache. I don't see why we should study it, do you?"

Leon made some evasive answer. He did understand Miss Gresham's object, he thought, but he could not find it in his heart to tell Nora.

Roscoe Everleigh had brought his fate upon himself by the indulgence of his rash temper; and Leon fancied that Miss Gresham intended that his children should gradually grow into a feeling as if it was retribution that overtook him, that darkened his splendid eyes with that fathomless gloom.

As they left the attic, absorbed in thought, neither observed that they had not replaced Vashti's picture. When they came again a few days after, it was gone—had vanished utterly.

CHAPTER IX.

A GRAPPLE WITH DEATH.

It was the third week of Margery Gresham's illness, and still the doctor shook his head, saying that the disease had not even reached its height. Stern in constitution as disposition, Margery Gresham battled fiercely with her disease.

Those were days when the higher the fever, the hotter they kept the sick-room, when a draught of pure cold water was considered radical poison, but notwithstanding the closed doors and windows of the fevered precinct, often there came thrilling to the ears of the Everleigh household shrieks and cries that appalled the stoutest heart of them all. There were days at a time when evidently they

were having terrible times in the sick-room, when Philip and the doctor came from it, weary and panting like men overcome with excessive fatigue. In the paroxysms of the fever, it was only by the main strength of two men and a woman that Margery was kept in her room.

"She will never be better till she yields," said Dr. Gracie. "She keeps the fever up by fighting it."

One day he came to Leon Brownlee, saying :

"Young man, we must have help in taking care of that sick woman, and there is nobody in the house fit to go near her but you. Bryce and I are completely worn out. She is a perfect giantess, and at times as bad as a mad woman. We keep a strait-jacket on her some of the time. Will you try it?"

"Certainly, if you say so ; I shall be glad to be of any service. But, doctor, why don't you have some woman to relieve Elise?"

"Because there isn't another sensible one in the house. No, no, Elise is a jewel ; she'll stand it, I'm convinced. We favor her all we can. But, Mr.—Mr. Brownlee I believe your name is—you're related to Miss Gresham, I hear?"

"Yes, sir ; she was my mother's cousin."

"Well, sir, as kindred of hers, I suppose you might be trusted with her life, eh?"

"Sir!" exclaimed Leon, astonished at such an address.

"Or something that she holds dearer than life," continued the doctor ; "the occurrence, for instance, that is the immediate cause of this present illness?"

"You speak blindly, sir. I am incapable of betraying any trust reposed in me."

"Exactly ; right, sir, right. Miss Gresham is delirious most of the time, and might say something in her ravings

that she would not like to have come to common ears. The fact is, sir," said the doctor, dropping his voice to a whisper, "that we must have some one to help us. Miss Gresham, crazy as she is, begs for you continually. But in admitting you to her room, we are trusting you with a secret that intimately concerns not only her welfare, but that of the poor lady yonder—Mrs. Everleigh. One whisper of the nature of this secret, which Miss Gresham has constantly on her tongue, would drop that lady in her grave more surely than a bullet sped to her heart."

Leon looked at the doctor in astonished doubt, wondering if he had not contracted the fever from his patient.

Without seeming to notice his bewilderment, Dr. Gracie continued :

"One word more, Mr. Brownlee. Whatever doubt or wonderment, whatever terrible suspicion may rise in your heart from hearing Margery Gresham's ravings, let me warn you to withhold your judgment for the present. Though she shrouds in her heart a secret that has blasted her life—though she raves of an appalling event within her knowledge, let me remind you that a greater than you or me has said, 'Judge not.' Ask me no questions; I cannot answer them, and you would be sorry if I did. No, you are a sensible fellow, I believe. I like the look of you, anyhow. Keep your own counsel, and pay as little attention as possible to Miss Gresham's ravings."

He took him up to a room that opened out of Margery's, and left him, saying :

"She is dozing for a little now. Elise will speak to you when you are wanted. When you are not, you will remain here, and should any one come, which is not likely, you are to send them off, as fast as they can go—any one, that is, except Philip, Elise, or myself; you understand? Well,

I'm off for a rest. Philip will relieve you, or help you, whenever it is necessary."

The door closed upon the physician softly, and Leon found himself alone and in a somewhat novel situation. All was quiet—so quiet that he could hear the crackle of the fire from the next room, and the faint rustle of the falling leaves outside. The silence and the close room oppressed him. He rose, to vary the tedium of the time with a slow walk to and fro, but the air of the room seemed to him tainted, and approaching the sash he threw it open and sat down beside it.

It was a sunny day for the season, even warm; the tap, tap, tap, of the woodpecker echoed among the almost leafless aisles, and the oaks tossed their giant branches in fearless strength against the autumn sky.

The door of the sick-room opened; Elise put her head through, and seeing the open window, looked aghast with consternation.

"It must be shut instantly," she said, under her breath, as she came into the room, shutting the door after her carefully, and herself closing the window in the face of Leon's remonstrance. "She is awake," she continued, "tossing, but middling calm, considering; she is asking for you, and looks sort of natural. Will you come in, sir?"

He followed her silently, almost gasping for breath, as the close, stifling atmosphere struck him, laden with the odor of drugs.

Margery Gresham was restless, her eyes fiery, her lips parched, her face scarlet hot, her heavy, unbound hair trailing over the pillow. There was a fire on the hearth, but it was the only cheerful thing there. The windows were

draped with funereal precision, and the room looked like the darkened cell of a recluse.

Margery did not recognize him, but she suffered the touch of his cool, strong hand upon her fevered head, and then scanning his brave young face, seemed to rest her wandering eyes. With her purple, swollen lips she said, in grieved tones:

"They won't give me my soldier-boy, and I want him so."

Soothing her gently with his hand, his low tones, his soft, deep eye, he gathered up her tangled hair, and tenderly as a woman might, bound it away from her face. She looked relieved, and putting up her hot hand drew his ear down to her lips.

"Give me some water, for the love of Heaven!" she whispered.

Elise, standing at the foot of the bed, shook her head as Leon looked at her.

"Not a drop," she said; "it is the doctor's orders."

"Why not?" said Leon.

"It would kill her, certain."

"Nonsense, I'm doctor enough to know better myself. Will fresh air kill her too?"

Elise nodded.

During this conversation Miss Gresham had resumed her tossing, flinging her arms wildly about, muttering to herself, and moaning.

"She is going to have one of her spells!" exclaimed Elise, anxiously. "We must get the strait-jacket on her if we can."

"Nonsense!" said Leon again. "Is there any water in the room?"

"Yes, sir, but she musn't have it."

"Where is it?" with an intonation of his voice that there was no opposing.

Elise pointed to a corner of the room. He helped himself to a cup of it—a brimming goblet of it—dashed outside with crystal drops, as he bore it to the panting lips in haste. She raised herself, seizing the goblet with both frantic hands, and draining it with fiery eagerness; then thrusting it back to him she cried:

"More—more!"

Elise, really pale with fright, stepped before him as he was returning for more.

"It will kill her—it will kill her!" she exclaimed, wringing her hands, and with tears in her eyes.

Commisserating her distress, he said:

"Elise, my father is a physician, as well as Dr. Gracie. I know perfectly well what I am about. I will answer for her life as for my own."

He gently but firmly put her from his path, and she watched him convey the second goblet to Miss Gresham, with dismayed and staring eyes. This also Margery drained with a deep inspiration of relief. She lay quiet for awhile, but soon commenced moaning again, putting both hands to her head, and murmuring:

"On fire! on fire?"

With his eyes on her, Leon had been opening the window farthest from the sick-bed. This, with the fire-place, created sufficient draft to rapidly purify the air of the room, and returning to his patient he brought a basin of water and towels, which he wrung alternately and placed upon her head, at the same time dispatching Elise for fresh water. She refused at first to go, but upon Leon's intimating that unless she did so he should go, the fear of being left alone

with her mistress, who she expected momentarily would be seized with a spell, overcame her reluctance.

Gradually Margery's moaning ceased, her muscles relaxed somewhat, and she fell away into comparatively easy slumber. She continued thus during the remainder of the day, sleeping, and delirious by turns, but on the whole much less violent and uncontrollable than on any preceding day.

Fortunately there was no one to interfere. Philip was sleeping very soundly, the sleep of exhaustion. Elise had indeed dispatched a messenger for Dr. Gracie, but the man did not find him; and with a heart full of uncomfortable trepidation, she was compelled to submit herself to the order of Doctor Leonidas for the present.

As night set in, the sick woman's fever rose again, and her mind wandered painfully. As he stood faithfully cooling her fevered head and face, bathing her hands and tossing arms, and at last forcing Elise into the service also, Leon felt often constrained to repeat Dr. Gracie's words, to preserve himself from passing judgment, and pronouncing this woman a poor, guilty, conscience-stricken creature. It was a sight such as one does not often see. Margaret Gresham, with her strong, determined temperament, her gleaming eyes and purple, swollen features, grappling with disease. Words, fierce and hot as a lava torrent, wailed brokenly from her lips.

Toward midnight the contest within her grew almost intolerable to look upon. Though not physically uncontrollable, mentally her excitement was intense. The veins stood out upon her hands, her arms, her throat, and her brow, like whipchords. Her eyes seemed starting from their sockets; her long hair becoming unbound again, trailed down over her neck and bosom.

"Get me a pair of shears," said Leon.

"It's of no use," said Elise; "she will not suffer you to cut her hair. Dr. Gracie tried often, but she begged so hard that he would not, beating him off all the time, that he gave it up."

"It must be done," said Leon, compressing his lips; and taking the shears from Elise's hand, he watched his opportunity, and skillfully severed the heavy locks from the head which their glossy abundance only oppressed.

"Couldn't you bleed her?" whispered Elise, appalled at the sight of that mighty struggle between the forces of life and death.

"No," said Leon, in the same low tone. "She is coming to the point where she will need all her blood; she has none to spare."

As midnight approached, the struggle deepened into one of awful solemnity. That hour in which we are told the tides of life rise till they wash the great shores of eternity, found Margery Gresham clinging one instant with stern determination to her constitutional vitality, the next dashed from it, as a vessel torn from its moorings by the fiercest storm that ever swept the seas, and drifting hopelessly out toward the wide waste of eternity.

Leon stood, watch in hand, scarcely turning his eyes from that ghastly face. She slept, but it was a sleep that it chilled the heart to look upon—so strange, white, and still.

Daylight dawned; Elise went noiselessly from the room to warn the household into the utmost silence, and came back as noiselessly, to stand watching that pallid face. The sun crept up the heavens, and sent curious flashes of light into the somber sick-room; the fire on the hearth

burned slow and pale, and the face of the sleeper faded momentarily.

Suddenly there was a passing, almost imperceptible ruffling of the quiet features; the feeble eyelids lifted themselves slowly. Putting to her lips a few drops of rare cordial which he had already prepared, Leon watched the result. She swallowed it with scarce an effort, her eyes closed again, almost before they were open, and again she slept.

At nightfall she waked, feeble as an infant, but the light in her sad eyes was the light of reason. Her sad eyes—Leon read the question and wonderment that formed almost instantly there, and he said, in a voice tender as a woman's:

"Cousin Margery, you have said nothing to betray your secret. I only know you have one, and that knowledge is as safe with me as in your own breast. The doctor being obliged to leave, placed you in my care. You must not speak one word, not one—take this."

He gave her more cordial, and by her quiet, regular breathing, he soon perceived that she slept again.

And thus it happened that Margery Gresham lived; and when Doctor Gracie called on the following morning, in some trepidation, because he had been unavoidably hindered from doing so before, his patient, propped up a little with pillows, was taking her breakfast of broth from Leon's own hand, too weak and feeble to lift her own or turn her head, submissive as a child.

CHAPTER X.

WARNED.

As Miss Gresham grew better, those who chose were suffered to come and see her. It was a slow and tedious coming back to health, and Margery Gresham ill was a very different person from Margery Gresham well. Nora and Frank kissed their aunt heartily. Vashti came once to see her, shy and very distant, but somehow enjoyed the call so much that she came again very soon, and brought Miss Dale with her. Miss Dale, as was her custom, quite monopolized this call, and Miss Gresham, from some feeling of courtesy, probably, did not for once exercise her peculiar faculty of taking her down from her height, much to Nora's disgust, who was also present. It was noticeable that Vashti came no more, save under Miss Dale's wing, and finally ceased coming altogether.

Mrs. Everleigh had by this time sufficiently recovered to walk slowly about, and came often, looking white and fragile as a spirit, to see her sister. The tears lay near the surface in those days, and the two rarely met without a suspicious moisture in the eyes of each.

Leon staid much with his cousin, sometimes reading to her, talking when she was able, and wondering at the serene happiness she displayed, when he had every reason to think she was a miserable woman at heart.

One evening he came into her room. She was sitting up—indeed, had sat up all day. She looked thoughtful, and seemed indisposed for talk; so, after venturing a remark or two, Leon began a sparkling little chat with Nora upon the fire-lit hearth. Miss Gresham watched the two.

They were talking in a light strain at first, but soon the conversation took a deeper tone. Nora, with her hand on Leon's knee, her arch face uplifted, and her wide-open, brown eyes drinking in and reflecting every expression of her friend's. He was telling her how he came to be a soldier.

During the war, under the impulse of a hasty zeal, he had run away from home and enlisted, though only seventeen at the time. Sorry enough he had been after the first—the more when he found that both his parents were seriously displeased at his taking such a course.

"It was a very foolish proceeding," he said to Nora; "foolish for a great many reasons; but it helped me in conquering a fault I have—that of judging and acting too harshly. Mother would have had me claimed from service, being under age, but father objected, though at the same time he left it at my option. He preferred that, having acted so hastily, I should suffer the penalty of so doing; and secretly I could see that he would be rather ashamed of me if I turned back from the soldier's life I had chosen."

"Was it such a hard life?" said Nora.

"Yes, it was a hard life. A boy of seventeen has not the maturity necessary for a campaign, either morally or physically. I have seen and heard a great many things I had far rather never have seen or heard. I am a man before my time, Nora; three years, in which I might have gladdened my mother's heart, and cultivated the holiest affections of my own, have gone to eternity, and I, a sadder, a wiser man, perhaps, but not, no, not a happier one."

He sat in grave thought, and Nora made him no reply.

"I gained in some things," he continued, musingly.

"I got experience, but experience is a bitter teacher. I learned something of men, of human nature. I found you, Nora." He looked upon her blushing face, smiling, with his hand upon her head. "I am glad that I found you, Nora."

"Are you, sir! Why?"

"You're not a vain little girl, so I may tell you. Don't you know—if you don't now, you will as you grow older—that now and then we meet with people who impress us very unpleasantly from the first—people, in short, that without really knowing why, we dislike very much?"

She gave him a look of intelligence.

"And, again, we meet with somebody who, in spite of a thousand little naughtinesses, suits us exquisitely; whose eye answers our eye; who smiles in sympathy with our smile; who, in short, we like very much. That is why I am glad I found you."

She looked at him, her bright eyes brimming with tears, and pretty color in her cheeks, smiling her pleasure.

"Do I suit you, sir?"

He looked at her with beaming eyes.

"Wonderfully. I should like to have you my mother's girl, to have you with me always."

Her arm was flung across his knee as she sat on a low stool before the fire; she laid her cheek upon it, and was silent; but Miss Gresham, from where she sat, could see the tears creeping slowly down her rosy cheeks.

Leon turned soon to a conversation with his cousin, but, contrary to her wont of late, she gave him only short replies, and her eye dwelt often on the face of the child.

"Come, Nora," she said, almost sharply, "it is time you were in bed."

Nora got up, and was leaving the room without a word,

when Leon held out his hand to say "good-night." She laid her hand in his, looking away, however; but he put up his other hand lightly, and turned her face toward him. He started a little at sight of her tears, and gave her a look half-arch, half-curious, said "good-night," and let her go. Turning lightly to his cousin, he said:

"I suppose that is a hint for me to go, too? I am keeping you up late for an invalid; it is time you were asleep, Margery."

She made an impatient movement, saying:

"I shall not sleep for hours. What I have seen this evening disturbs me too much. Leonidas, what notions have you been putting into that child's head?"

He looked surprised, yet amused.

"Notions? I hope she may keep them there."

"There is too much reason for fearing that she will."

"Fearing? I do not understand you."

"I mean that it is a very foolish thing to play upon the feelings of a child in that manner."

"It was not play, Margery; I meant every word I said. I like little Nora wonderfully."

"Little Nora! In a few short years she will be a woman."

"A woman; yes, thank Heaven—my little pearl, the apple of my eye, Nora," he said, fervently.

"Leonidas!" she exclaimed, half rising. "What is this—what do you mean? Why should you be glad to have Nora arrive at womanhood? She is much more charming as a child. I wish she could always be a child."

"So do not I. I will have her a woman—keeping her child heart, but a woman, in stature, culture, and intellect; and then——"

He smiled joyously, as though his thought was a precious one.

"And then, Leonidas—what then?"

"Then, cousin, I will marry her, if she will have me——"

"Ridiculous! You will do no such thing. You will never wait for a child like that."

"Margery, I will."

"You shall not. I tell you, Leonidas, I will not have it."

He smiled again, doubtingly."

"I have seen it all along," she continued. "I suspected that thought was in your heart, and if it was anybody else but you two, I should think I had not the least cause to fear; but you, I know you——"

"But why should you fear this, Margery?"

"Because it is what I kept you from Everleigh for. I had a presentiment that mischief would come of it, if you came here. If I had been well, I should have sent these children off for a visit before you came. But I had no thought that you would take up such an idea concerning Nora. Vashti begins to look womanly. I should have guarded her from you, but I never thought of Nora."

"Cousin, I wish you would explain yourself, in just as few words as possible, as you once told me," he said, his color rising a little.

"Leonidas, I had rather see you in your grave than married to an Everleigh," she added, as an incredulous expression crossed his face.

"Cousin Margery, I think you are about to have a relapse. You had better retire immediately. Good-night."

He left her chafing at the thought implied in his last words, namely, that she was talking wildly, and did not

know what she was saying; and the first time he came to her, the next day, she resumed the conversation at the very point he had dropped it, trying in vain to make herself calm as she did so.

"I know what I am talking about, if my voice does tremble," she said. "Hear my reason once, Leonidas, and then I will drop the subject, for the present, at least. These Everleighs inherit dispositions that it is wicked to perpetuate. For many generations they have all come to some fearful end, through the indulgence of this disposition. Those whom they have injured most, forgive them the most readily, only to be maltreated again, and worse than before. To my certain knowledge, no Everleigh has ever lived beyond a certain age, save to an inheritance of idiocy or madness. I know it to be so, and I tell you this in time. There is no need now for any heart-breaking. Your interest in Lenore Everleigh is a mere fancy now. Her attachment to you is evidently already very deep, but it is not the love of a woman. Go away from Everleigh, Leonidas, and never put your foot inside its miserable walls again."

She ceased speaking, sinking back in her chair utterly exhausted with the violence of her emotion, and the haste with which she had spoken.

Leon had listened with a face on which a variety of emotions were pictured as she proceeded. He made no effort now to answer her, but sitting long, with only silence between himself and Margery, rose at last and left the room. Through the hall, and down the stairs, and out into the leafless groves, his arms crossed upon his breast, his hat forced low down over his brows, he was in so deep thought that he did not notice a little form that followed him, dodging behind the tress, stealing close, with a foot-fall

like a fairy's, and dropping now and then upon the leaves to cry.

"If he does leave—if he does, after all," she whispered to herself, pathetically, "I shall never be good any more—never! If I could only—only see his face"—taking a deep breath. "I see it now; but how sorry he looks," and in a fresh burst of tears she cowered down close to a tree, burying her face in her apron, and bringing her bonnet down close, lest her sobs should reach his ear.

Turning suddenly in his path, Leon came right upon her before he saw her. He stopped motionless before her, wondering what ailed her.

"Lenore!"

She started, but did not lift her head, sobbing more violently than before.

Sitting upon the dry leaves by her side, he lifted her head with gentle force, and removed her hands from her face. What a tear-stained face it was; how woe-begone. His features contracted painfully.

"What is it, Lenore, my dear child—what has grieved you so terribly?"

She could not speak for crying. He waited patiently and long, till she ceased her sobbing from very weakness, and said, in broken tones, which made his heart ache:

"I heard all Aunt Margery said to you this morning—every word. I didn't mean to. I was passing by the door; it stood ajar; and when I heard the first, I was so frightened I could not run away, and—and it made me feel so bad. I never thought that I was listening till I heard you coming to the door. Then I crept away as fast as I could. Is it true, Leon—is it? Can it be true what she said about me and all of us? I don't believe it. I won't believe it. I had rather die than believe it. I wish I was dead now—

stamped down under the ground where I couldn't torment anybody any more. I wish——"

"Lenore!" in a voice of grave reproof.

"It is no use for me to try and be good—didn't she say it wasn't? And isn't she sending you off because of it, as though I was a mad dog and might bite you? Oh, Leon, that is worst of all. You said you would be my brother, and here you are going where I shall never see you again."

"Lenore, listen to me—be still and listen to me. I am not going, do you hear that? Not now, I mean, not an instant sooner for what Margery told me; and when I do go, it will not be forever, by any means. I shall come often to see you; I shall write to you. Does that comfort you any? What! crying again? What a tender heart it is."

His own eyes were full of tears, and his fine lips trembled.

"Nora," he resumed, "my poor child, I had far rather you had never heard what your Aunt Margery said, but as you have heard it, show me that you, at least, have no part in this inheritance by controlling yourself now—let me see if you can do it. I want to talk with you. Let me see if you can control yourself."

He waited for her. She had stopped crying, and was trying hard to still the little tremulous mouth.

As she grew calmer, he continued:

"Nora, my dear little sister, let me tell you. It is my solemn conviction that, though the main portion of what Margery said of former members of your family may be true, it rests entirely with yourself whether it ever need be true of you. Let me tell you what you can do. You can make of yourself such a sweet and pure-souled woman, such a tender, shining example of gentleness, moderation, long

suffering, forgiveness, that—Lenore, do you hear?—you may save Frank and Vashti from that terrible fate that has overtaken so many of your race."

They walked slowly toward the house, a glow on the cheek of each.

"I was so frightened when I saw your face, sir, I followed you and watched you, and you looked just as though you were thinking about leaving me. What were you thinking about, sir—wasn't it that?"

"No, I was thinking how I could best save you from these dangers that surround you. Now I see you are going to save yourself."

The tears flashed into Nora's eyes at his kind words, and she lifted the hand that held hers up to her grateful lips. Raising her eyes, she saw the anxious countenance of Margery Gresham at one of the upper windows. She dropped his hand, crying:

"Oh, there is Aunt Margery."

"What of that?" he said, laughing. "Aunt Margery isn't an ogre, is she?"

"She will be displeased to see us such good friends."

"Will she? Foolish child. I shall talk with her about it."

"She will interfere and put a stop to it, sir. Aunt Margery interferes with everything she doesn't like."

"She may interfere as much as she likes; it will make no difference; you and I will like each other just as well as if she was pleased."

He left her in the hall and went directly up to see Margery Gresham. She was walking feebly about the room, her thin face sharpened with an expression of keen displeasure. She lifted both her hands as he came in, saying:

"You were always willful—you're willful now. Don't tell

me about it—I don't want to hear. Go your own gait, but I warn you I will thwart you yet, if there's wit in woman to do it."

"But, Margery——"

"Off with you," she said, sharply. "I am too ill to tell you all I think of this ridiculous matter. I will talk of it no more. I have no more pleasure in you, so leave me to my own thoughts. Go, court your baby wife."

"As you please, madam."

He left her, more in sorrow than in anger.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PARTING.

Miss Gresham's recovery kept pace with her desires. She left the room the day after her interview with Leon, told in the last chapter. With her old energy she went immediatly about reinstating matters as they had been previous to her illness. School hours were resumed, tasks were lengthened, Miss Dale or herself sitting constantly in the school-room, and keeping the children busier than ever before. Lenore she scarcely suffered from her sight, and if ever the child, weary of this restraint and watching, stole to Leon's side, she joined them instantly, interposing her presence between them, and preventing any privacy.

Leon did not seem in the least annoyed, and in the light of his cheerful presence Nora basked and found rest and relief. Leon now and then gave Miss Gresham one of his keen, quiet glances, as much as to say:

"You see, my dear cousin, you do not thwart us in the

least. We have all we ask for. Your presence only gives zest and piquancy to the entertainment."

Miss Gresham, since that unfortunate day when she had expressed her mind to no purpose, had quite given Leon the cold shoulder. There were several reasons for this.

* * * * * *

"I am going in the morning, Lenore."

It was evening; she was sitting in her favorite place, upon a cushioned stool on the fire-bright hearth, one round, white arm across his knee, chatting or thinking, or reading a little from a book on her lap.

Margery Gresham sat on the opposite side of the hearth, Vashti, Frank, and Miss Dale were near, Mrs. Everleigh sat by Margery. At the moment Leon spoke, a lively discussion was going on between Miss Dale and Frank, with now and then a word from Vashti and Mrs. Everleigh. No one could have heard what he said save she to whom he spoke, Lenore.

She did not start, as he had expected; but putting his hand on hers, he could feel the leap of the thrilled life-blood through her veins.

"Brave, Nora," he said, in the same low tone, beyond the reach of even Margery's acutely sensitive ear. "I shall walk to Hart Corners from here; my valise has already gone. I want to see you for half an hour under that old elm back of the Hermitage. Wrap up close, and be there at eight o'clock."

"Yes, sir," faintly.

"And keep a good heart, my sister Nora."

The little hand pressed his convulsively, and she kept back a sob, though her heart seemed bursting.

It was strange what a hold he had of the child's affections, and not so strange either. No one had ever touched

the key-note of her tender heart before. To no one else was she what he had said she was to him; and buoyant of spirit as she naturally was, with her rare, delicate organization and precocious mind, she had needed such an honest friend as he to direct her developing powers in the proper channel.

The next morning Leon parted from them all, save Nora, nonchalantly enough. Miss Gresham's sharp eyes were wide open, but she got no satisfaction; Leon did not even look significant, and she was really glad when he had gone. She watched him from the door till a turn in the road hid him from sight, and concluded she was well rid of him. Meanwhile, he had no sooner got out of sight of the house, than, taking one of the woodland paths, he made a complete turn round the house, up through the orchard to the elm back of the Hermitage.

Nora was there, looking pale, but struggling to be calm, because she knew it would please him. She held out both hands to him, looking at him, but not speaking. He took them in his.

"My little Nora, you won't forget me, I know. You must write to me, just as you would talk if I were here."

"Yes, sir; but when are you coming to Everleigh again?"

"I don't know; perhaps not for a year. Margery Gresham does not like to have me."

"But you said she should not interfere, sir."

"Neither shall she; but you know I should not want to go into another person's house against her will."

"It is not her house."

"She rules it at present; to a certain extent it is hers; and, Nora, she is going to be one of your stumbling-blocks. She means well, and she has resolved to devote herself to

the family—to your family. You must bear with her, as a part of the discipline she imposes to perfect you, prepare you for the work."

"Yes, sir, I will try; but I think it is very hard that you should have to stay away because she says so."

"I shall write you so often you will hardly miss me."

"What if she should refuse to let me have the letters? It would break my heart if she did."

"She will scarcely do that. If anything of the kind should happen you must let me know, and I will arrange it."

"And will it be a whole year before you come again, sir?"

"It is likely. You will be so changed then I shall hardly know you."

"I hope not, sir."

"Nora, how much do you like me?"

"How much, sir—how much? Oh, how can you ask?'

"Because I wanted to say something to you, and I wondered if I'd best say it to you now."

"If it is anything you want me to do for you, sir, I promise you beforehand that I will do it."

"Nora, you are my little sister now; you shall be my sister a few years, and then—and then, Nora, I shall ask you to be my wife."

Countenance and color changed mystically. He could not read her expression for once.

"Have I displeased you?" he said.

"Oh, no, sir; but I was wondering whether it would be as nice to be your wife as your sister."

"It would suit me much better," he said, laughing.

"Very well, sir."

He laughed again at her artless reply.

"Then I may consider it a bargain, may I?"

"Yes, sir," she said, gravely.

"Well, then, my little child-wife, good-by—keep a brave heart."

He took her pale face between his hands, kissed her cheek tenderly, said "Good-by" again, and was gone.

CHAPTER XII.

MISS DALE.

"Mamma," said Vashti, coming suddenly into her mother's room the next day, "mamma, are you not mistress of your own house, I should like to know?"

"You know I am not able to be, Vashti. I leave everything to your aunt."

"Not everything; you still have the right to order things differently, if you choose," replied Vashti, flinging herself into a seat with a gloomy face.

"No, my dear; literally I may have, but it would be ungenerous to exercise it in any other than an extreme case."

"Well, it is outrageous—I think it is. So, there," said Vashti, rising and taking up one of those angry walks to and fro which Mrs. Everleigh knew betokened a storm. Her fair face grew a shade paler. She dreaded inexpressibly one of Vashti's outbreaks, and she said, gently:

"What is the matter, my child—what has happened?"

"Oh, it is nothing new, I am out of sorts to-day; everything vexes me, but I do think Aunt Margery behaves dreadfully. I wish I was a man, and I'd show her."

"What has she done?" said Mrs. Everleigh, drearily.

"She treats Miss Dale shockingly. I don't see why Miss Dale can't hear our lessons as well as Aunt Margery. It is what she was hired for, and I should not blame her for quitting any day, if she is so used. Just now Aunt Margery called her a fool. Who is Aunt Margery that she should call the true friend of the family Miss Dale has proved herself, by a name like that?"

Nora entered the room at that moment, and she said:

"Miss Dale has been no better friend than Aunt Margery, Vashti."

"That is your opinion, not mine, not mine."

"What advantage is it to her to do all she does for us?"

"Selfish people have selfish reasons; how should I know what hers are?"

Nora's color rose at this aggravating reply; a sharp answer was on her lips, but she checked herself in time, and her face burned deeper with a flush of shame than it had with anger just before.

"Can I forget so soon?" she said to herself, reproachfully.

"Did you hear your aunt say that?" asked Mrs. Everleigh; "it doesn't sound exactly like Margery."

"I did not hear it, but Miss Dale did. I had far rather she had said it to me; Miss Dale is the most forgiving creature in the world. She told me of this, with tears in her eyes, at the same time begging me to say nothing about it; but I shall. Mamma, will you reprove Aunt Margery, or shall I?"

"Reprove Margery, my child! what are you talking about?" exclaimed Mrs. Everleigh, with an accent of pain.

"It is plain enough what I am talking about; will you give Margery Gresham a lesson in politeness, or shall I?"

"I shall not, certainly I shall not," Mrs. Everleigh said, with some spirit.

"Then I shall!"

She was turning to leave the room, when Mrs. Everleigh cried:

"Vashti, you will drive me crazy—what are you going to do? Come back here directly. There is truth enough in what they say of this Everleigh blood. Vashti, come back!"

"Do come back, sister, do," pleaded Nora, "you will make mamma ill; how can you vex her so?"

Vashti stopped irresolutely, and Nora, passing her, fled swiftly to Miss Dale's apartment.

"Miss Dale," she cried, bursting in upon that lady, "did Aunt Margery call you a fool?"

"Why, no—not exactly," answered she, with a guilty blush, thinking she might have got herself into trouble."

"Well, you had better see to Vashti, then, or there's trouble ahead. She says you said so, and she is bound for a fuss with Aunt Margery about it; be quick, if you would hinder her?"

Muttering something about Vashti having misunderstood her, Miss Dale hurried away, intercepted and captured Vashti, and bringing her to her room, turned the key in the door, while Nora, delighted with her success, returned to Mrs. Everleigh, laughing, and announcing, much to mamma's satisfaction, that Vashti was safe.

"There is some mystery about it, mamma. Miss Dale has not told all the truth, I am satisfied. She was frightened, I can tell you, when I told her what Vashti was going to do. She muttered something about Vashti having misunderstood her, and went after her as quick as she could."

Mrs. Everleigh was grateful at having the storm averted;

but Miss Dale was a sort of favorite with her, and she did not like to hear anything against her. She told Nora so, and Nora declared she would not say anything to grieve her for the world.

"But, mamma," she continued, "don't you know one can't help disliking some folks? I have tried my best to like Miss Dale, just to please you; but I can't like her to save my life. However, we won't quarrel about her. Mamma, do you miss Leon any? You used to like him."

"Yes, dear, I miss him very much. I liked him very much, and was pleased to find that my little girl had obtained the friendship and notice of so true a gentleman. He spoke of you very kindly, dear, and asked me if he might write to you."

"Oh, mamma! and what did you say?"

"I told him yes; certainly I did. It will be a great benefit to you, I hope. He is very kind to take such an interest in you as he does."

Nora's face had a soft flush of pleasure at these kind words said of her friend; her heart was sore yet from the parting, and, with a few tears dropping on her mother's face, she said:

"Mamma, I am so glad."

"Why, dear?"

"To think you like him, too. I thought nobody in this house liked him as I do. Aunt Margery told me to-day she was glad he was gone, and it made me feel so bad. Mamma, you don't know how much good he did me; what beautiful thoughts he put in my heart. I am going to try so hard to be good—to grow good; mamma, do you think I can?"

"My darling, certainly you can, if you try."

Meanwhile, closeted with Vashti, Miss Dale was cajoling

that young lady to the best of her ability. Vashti had taken it into her head to become Miss Dale's champion—defender of her rights, &c.—and she was exceedingly loth to give up this chivalrous notion. Miss Dale had to shed several crocodile tears, and a few genuine ones, representing in moving terms that it would be the means of getting her turned away from her place, and all that, before Vashti would consent that her dearest friend should continue to suffer from the unrebuked rudeness of Miss Gresham. The truth of the matter was, that Miss Dale had told an unmitigated falsehood. She was a sort of sneaking firebrand at Everleigh, creating family jars whenever there was the least opportunity for doing so. She it was who put into Vashti's head a notion that Nora was mamma's favorite, that Margery Gresham was a shameful tyrant, that nobody liked Vashti but she, &c., &c., *ad infinitum.*

The girl, in fact, was completely under her thumb.

CHAPTER XIII.

DISCUSSION ON BOARDING-SCHOOLS.

Miss Gresham was too much occupied watching other folks, to observe Miss Dale very particularly. She disliked her instinctively, and realizing that her educational system was very defective, she took that branch in her own hands, but with all her foresightedness, the governess had quite out-generaled her. Cunning, selfish, deep, and treacherous, she had succeeded in impressing Miss Gresham with the idea that she was shallow, ignorant, and transparent—a creature to be countenanced but not feared. If Miss Dale

was obtrusive, as she was apt to be, Miss Gresham leveled a stony glance at her that Miss Dale writhed under secretly, but submitted to in silence.

Miss Dale was very anxious to bring about a different state of things. It was her ambition to obtain over Mrs. Everleigh the control she held over Vashti. Her influence over the latter had as yet brought forth very insufficient fruits, and she was really weary of her, her fondness, and the school-room where she was compelled to be entirely submissive to Miss Margery's dictatorial sway. Immediately upon this idea entering her head, she sat about maturing a plan for the furtherance of her object. She carefully instilled into the mind of Vashti, and of Nora also as far as she could, a desire to leave Everleigh for the purpose of attending school. She knew from various remarks she had heard from time to time, that such a plan would meet with the most violent opposition from Miss Gresham, but she trusted to keep herself out of sight, and to succeed for all that, and thus much accomplished, to see herself duly installed as maid, or more properly, as companion to Mrs. Everleigh.

Vashti swallowed the bait easily enough, but Nora was slower to be affected, by reason of her own disaffection toward Miss Dale. She succeeded, however, at last, in exciting in the hearts of both girls an eager desire to attend a boarding-school. This done, she very carefully withdrew from the discussion.

Vashti opened the campaign by broaching the subject to Mrs. Everleigh, who, greatly to the delight of both girls, signified her approval, subject to Aunt Margery's, but agreeing to broach the matter to her sister at the earliest opportunity.

Miss Margery, as might have been expected, put her veto on the whole proceeding.

"It was unsuitable every way," she said. "Girls learned nothing but mischief at boarding schools. They were much better off at home, especially these girls."

"And why *these girls?*" Vashti condescended to ask, in high dudgeon.

"Because you are not fit to mingle with the outside world. You are of an entirely different metal. You are a race of yourselves, and are safer kept by yourselves."

Poor Nora had no need to ask why; she understood too well what Margery meant; but Vashti said:

"Aunt Margery, how strangely you talk! Do you suppose that, for no better reason than that, we are going to consent to be mewed up here forever? Do you suppose we can content ourselves, we Everleighs, with the plain education we are getting at present? I cannot, for one; and I should like to know, since you are to talk and act for yourself and mamma, too—I should like to know why we cannot have accomplishments as well as other folks?"

"What do you mean by accomplishments? You can have the necessary teachers here—no need to go from home for that."

"Why not go from home? Are we never to see anything but Everleigh all our lives? Why not go from home?"

"For a reason that I gave you once, Vashti; you are too much like gunpowder—too explosive to be handled by strange hands."

A fire blazed up in Vashti's eyes at this allusion. Her lips parted to speak, but turning to her mother angrily, she said:

"What is the use of all this? Are we to stay at Everleigh forever?"

"Vashti, Vashti!" said poor, timid, irresolute Mrs. Everleigh; "I—I am sure your aunt will do what is right—certainly she will."

"That is not the point. Are we Miss Margery Gresham's children, or are we yours?"

"I—I wish you wouldn't talk so," said Mrs. Everleigh. "I wish you would wait till to-morrow, dear; don't talk any more about it now, please."

"Mamma, this matter must be settled to-day—now. If we waited for fifty to-morrows, we should be no better off. Mamma, are we to go or stay?"

"My child, I told you I was willing if your aunt was."

"What is it to her?"

Mrs. Everleigh looked distressed, and Miss Gresham, taking a step toward her sister, put one hand heavily on her shoulder, saying:

"Eva, be still;" and, lifting the other toward Vashti, she said: "You scout my authority, but you cannot leave home without my consent. Your mother has clothed me with authority over you, and she has a perfect right to do so. I shall be true to that authority, but I shall not refuse my consent to your carrying out the scheme you have taken into your willful head. If you will go, you will. I shall not put an obstacle in your way beyond my earnest disapproval; but I will tell you, child, every hour of the day after you leave Everleigh, you will wish you had staid at home. I know your morbid, unhappy temperament. I know what you, with your fierce, ungoverned temper, will suffer among strangers, and those strangers the heartless set schoolgirls are. They will never bear with you. You will have to be careful how you carry yourself there. People

do as they are done by in this world you are so anxious to see; and, Vashti Everleigh, so sure as there is a sun in the heavens, you are going straight to destruction, more swiftly than even most of your race, if you do not soon begin to curb this frightful temper of yours."

Vashti had a purple cheek but folding her arms, she only walked back and forth across the room, while Margery, turning to Nora, said:

"I suppose your head is set on boarding-school, too?"

"I wanted to go," said Nora, timidly.

"I expected as much," said Margery, coldly, as she left the room with a step even more emphatic than her words had been.

"Well, then, I suppose we may consider that matter settled," said Vashti, with some bitterness, but more triumph in her tone. "You and I will get to see something else besides Everleigh, Nora."

"I am sorry you have vexed your aunt so, Vashti," said Mrs. Everleigh, sadly; "I would rather have you stay at home than to have angered her."

"Angered her," replied Vashti, contemptuously. "There it is again. I can tell you, mamma, 'People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.' It is 'diamond cut diamond,' when Aunt Margery talks to me about temper; she always leaves me ten times more angry than she finds me. It is one reason why I want to get away from Everleigh. I shall leave her behind, thank goodness; and I am glad, for your sake, that you like her better than I do."

Mrs. Everleigh was silent, and still very sad.

"Mamma, it is very foolish to be vexed because Aunt Margery and I don't get on well together. I wish you wouldn't," said Vashti, a little sore about her conscience, at sight of her mother's pale and sorrowful face.

"If you would only try a little harder to please your aunt, dear."

The girl bit her lip. She considered Aunt Margery very hard to please, but she said, with an attempt at good humor:

"Well, well, when I come back from Laurel Hill, we will see about that."

"Vashti, couldn't you give it up? We will have any teacher you want here."

"Give it up, now! after such a battle for the privilege of going? No, indeed, mamma, I can't do that. I intend to set right about my arrangements for going. Come, Nora."

"Mamma, sister," said Nora, coming out of a corner where she had sat silent for the most part during this lengthy discussion, "I think I won't go."

"Won't go where?" exclaimed Vashti, turning back, as she was leaving the room.

"I think I won't go to Laurel Hill."

"Not go to Laurel Hill!" cried Vashti again. "Why, what do you mean? I thought you were as anxious to go as I."

"I should like to go, but I think Aunt Margery knows best; and so I am going to give it up."

"Oh, that is it, is it, Prudence?" said her sister, angrily. "I might have known you would show no more spirit than that. Well, you can do as you please; I am going."

Vashti went out of the room, slamming the door after her, and Nora, laying her head on Mrs. Everleigh's shoulder, said:

"I am sorry Vashti is angry; and I did want to go very much; but, after all you and Aunt Margery said, I thought it would not be right; and you know I am trying to be good now."

Mrs. Everleigh kissed the little face on her shoulder, passing her hand caressingly over the soft curls, saying, in a low voice:

"I am very much pleased with my little daughter." There was an interval of silence, and then she added: "Couldn't you go and tell your aunt you have given up going?"

"I—I don't think I could, mamma. Aunt Margery is so angry; she will be sure to make me some short answer, that will make me sorry I went near her."

"I don't think she would, now; she would be too well pleased to know you were not going. She always had a great prejudice against boarding-schools; and I don't know but she is right. I wish you would go and tell your aunt. I hate to have her so displeased; and she blames me, I know, for not making you both stay at home. But how can I? I should have such a fuss with Vashti as would make me ill again. Do go and tell her, Nora"

"I don't like to at all, mamma, but I will."

Miss Gresham was superintending the maids, who were cleaning the hall. As Nora went slowly toward her, she called out to her to go back and keep out of the slop. The child retreated, but stood near the doorway, waiting for an opportunity to speak to her aunt. Presently she came across to where she was and stood without seeing her, watching the maids.

"Aunt Margery," said a little timid voice.

Miss Gresham started.

"Oh, it is you, is it?" she said. "Where did you drop from? What do you want?"

"I have concluded I won't go to Laurel Hill, Aunt Margery, seeing you and mamma think I had better not."

Miss Gresham bent her stately form to look at the child. Nora's brown eyes filled with tears at this keen scrutiny.

"Your sister has not given up going?" said Miss Gresham, without removing her eyes from Nora's face.

"No, ma'am."

Miss Gresham stood erect again, coolly directing the movements of the maids; but as Nora turned to go away, she put her hand on her head, saying, gravely, and with an unwonted look in her gray eyes:

"I think there may be hopes of you yet, Lenore Everleigh."

CHAPTER XIV.

LAUREL HILL—TROUBLE.

It was now the last of November. The fall term was near its close, but Vashti would not hear of waiting till the winter term opened—which would be on the second day of January. Miss Gresham suffered her to have her own way, and on the first day of December, the family carriage, an old-fashioned, ponderous vehicle, was brought to the door under the auspices of Pete. Miss Gresham herself accompanied Vashti—an arrangement not at all to the satisfaction of her willful niece, but which she submitted to because she could not help herself.

Laurel Hill Seminary was a well-known and popular boarding-school for misses, in those days when good schools were not so common as now. It stood on a broad, high eminence back a little from the Hudson River, in the midst of fine, ornamental grounds, and, altogether, making quite an imposing appearance. The buildings

were large and commodious, fronting on and inclosing three sides of a square court.

The Everleigh coach wound slowly up a handsome carriage road to the seminary. They had been two days and a night on the way, and the travelers, weary and hungry, were glad to arrive at their destination.

They were ushered immediately into a sitting-room, common as it seemed to the pupils, for groups of girls were standing or sitting about chatting in a subdued manner, for schoolgirls, owing probably to the presence of a teacher, who now and then touched a small bell at her elbow when the buzz of voices rose above a certain limit. She herself seemed to be reading, and did not notice the advent of the travelers.

The various chatty groups subsided into a lower hum as Miss Gresham, after a rapid glance about the room with her usual straightforward manner, proceeded to the fire, unasked, since no one invited her, and took possession of a chair for herself and one for Vashti, who, her cheeks burning with confused blushes, could not do otherwise than follow her aunt.

Schoolgirls as a mass are sometimes very rude. No one jogged the teacher, who sat some distance from the fire, and was still unconscious of the arrival of strangers. Some stood in rather uncomfortable proximity to the new-comers, whispering, making remarks that did not entirely fall short of ears for which they were not intended.

Vashti felt her ears tingle under her hood at an allusion to Mother Bunch and Noah's Ark, which evidently was intended to apply either to herself or her aunt.

Miss Gresham heard the remarks also, and gave Vashti a keen, sarcastically-triumphant glance, and she said, in a low tone:

"You will doubtless be greatly improved in manners by your sojourn here. I've a mind to stop myself."

Vashti made no reply, and presently the teacher already alluded to came forward with an apology for not having seen them before, and a rebuke to the chattering girls that sent them to a respectful distance. Without relieving them from their traveling wrapping, she led the way out of the room and across the hall to a smaller sitting-room, well lighted and warmed, in which, having assisted to remove cloaks and hoods, she left them, while she went to summon Mrs. Gordon, the mistress of the establishment.

Mrs. Gordon soon made her appearance—a woman of the "fat, fair, and forty" stamp—rather graceful and affable in general deportment, with a touch of stateliness about her.

She received her new pupil with a grave courtesy that somewhat soothed Vashti's ruffled spirits, had a most refreshing repast prepared for them in time, entertained them till bed-time very agreeably, and finally put them in a comfortable sleeping-room.

Miss Gresham was off the next morning bright and early, and Vashti was left to her fate.

She had risen at four on a cold, wintry morning to see her aunt off. At seven they had breakfast—the pupils—and Vashti joined them. She had not partaken of breakfast with her aunt, and brought to the table a fine appetite, which, however, almost wholly vanished as she stood at the long table, feeling herself the cynosure of many eyes—strange, uncomfortable, schoolgirl eyes.

She had by this time become disagreeably conscious that she was not dressed as others were. Living the secluded life they did at Everleigh, but little attention had been paid to outward adornments or the fashions of the outside

world; and Vashti was still wearing the half-short dresses and large, brown Holland aprons peculiar to little girls. Her wardrobe was always kept well supplied with clothes, such as they were, and, in her eagerness to get off to school, she did not wait for any replenishing of the same. This oversight was Miss Dale's fault, whose business it was to see that Nora and Vashti were properly dressed; but Miss Dale had a way of attending to her business with the least trouble possible. Mrs. Everleigh, weak, ill, and nervous, scarce had noticed that her eldest born, her Vashti, was just on the verge of womanhood.

Thus it happened that Vashti stood at the long breakfast-table that morning, tall almost as a woman, dressed most unbecomingly in the garments of a child, with her hair put plainly back from her olive-tinted face, trembling and awkward, because frightened and embarrassed, and sinking into her seat when the blessing had been pronounced with a certain feeling of relief at concealing so much of her objectionable garments. Her appetite was quite gone; she could eat little, though the table was plentifully supplied with good, wholesome, and tempting edibles. The other girls were immediately absorbed in the business of eating, though now and then one glanced expressively at the "new scholar's brown holland."

Mrs. Gordon's establishment allowed the pupils to dress as they pleased. They were mostly children of wealthy parents, many of them considering themselves young ladies already, and dressing accordingly. The light discipline imposed at Laurel Hill afforded them ample opportunity of "shopping" at the neighboring county town, and often some of them were even invited there to parties, which they were suffered to attend—always, however, under the wing

of a skillful chaperon—either Mrs. Gordon herself, or some one selected or approved by her.

The consequence of this was that the fair young habitues of Laurel Hill were rather "dressy." Amid all this blossoming array Vashti, with her homely, unbecoming garb, looked as though she might have strayed from some orphan asylum or charity-school, that uniformed its *protegees* after a style, to say the least, intensely peculiar. She sat all during breakfast, scarce lifting her inky lashes, rose when the rest did, and went to her room, thinking Aunt Margery was not so greatly mistaken about boarding-schools after all. When the bell rang at eight o'clock for prayers in the lecture-room, she would have staid in her room had she dared.

Most of her new schoolmates smiled when the "new scholar" came in a little after the rest, more awkward and embarrassed than ever; and when, in her fright at her novel situation, she sat down in the first seat she came to, that happening to be Professor Thorpe's chair, a very insufficiently suppressed titter went round.

Professor Thorpe himself was at the other side of the room, lowering a window which had been raised to cool the too highly heated room. He turned at the sound of that low laugh, and seeing the drooping, blushing figure in his chair, glanced with sharp displeasure at his rude pupils, and crossing the floor stood by Vashti's side, saying:

"My child, are you the new pupil?"

He had a very pleasant voice, and Vashti, won by its kindness, lifted her downcast eyes timidly, saying:

"I came last night, sir."

"Your name is Everleigh, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, Vashti Everleigh," she answered, in an almost indistinct voice.

"Vashti? ah!" with a curious, somewhat surprised glance at her. "Queen Vashti, let me show you a pleasanter seat; you are shivering, I see."

He took her hand and led her down the long aisle bordered with curious, still smiling girls. As she passed one, a coarse-featured, sallow-complexioned girl, she put out her foot with apparent inadvertence. Vashti stumbled over it, and would have fallen, but for her conductor's hand, at full length upon the floor. Another titter, even louder than before, went round, and the sallow-complexioned girl laughed louder than any.

As Vashti staggered to her feet again, a flush of indignant feeling swept over her face. She lifted her jetty eyelashes, sparks kindling in her great dusky eyes, as she looked the girl who had laughed the loudest full in the face. She drew herself a little more erect, swept a scornful glance down the giggling line, and said, in distinct tones:

"You are as ignorant and uncivil as Hottentots!"

It needed not the severe reprimand of Professor Thorpe to dye the cheeks of the whole abashed crowd with shamed crimson; and Vashti followed her conductor now with so spirited and graceful a carriage of her slender person, that he repeated to himself, as he returned to his own seat:

"Queen Vashti!"

Presently Mrs. Gordon herself came in, and a whole bevy of teachers. A chapter from the Bible followed, a short lecture, a fervent prayer, all the pupils rising during the last.

As the pupils passed from the room, Mrs. Gordon stopped an instant by Professor Thorpe's chair, spoke a few words with him, and then putting her hand on Vashti's arm, as she passed her, said:

"Professor Thorpe would like to talk with you a little."

Vashti started and changed color, thinking she was about to be reproved for that indignant expression of hers a little before; but as she stood near him, wishing the earth would swallow her, his pleasant voice again reassured her.

"I want to talk with you about what branches of study you will pursue."

Her face lighted up, and as he proceeded to make a gentle but thorough examination into the nature and extent of her requirements, Vashti forgot all about the brown Holland apron. Here she had no cause for embarrassment. Thanks to Miss Gresham, what she knew she knew well. Miss Gresham never did her work by halves, and Professor Thorpe found her wonderfully well versed for a girl of fourteen, in all the branches that constitute a good English education.

He apportioned to Vashti her lessons, provided her with the necessary books, and dismissed her with the sunshine of her own rare, beautiful smile gladdening her face.

That first day passed, the rest of it, more pleasantly. Mrs. Gordon, informed of the annoyance to which she had been subjected, had provided against any immediate recurrence of the same. She was elated by her interview with Professor Thorpe—pleased with her books; more elated still, when at recitations, she found that she was placed in classes with girls much older than herself—and then did herself such credit as to attract marked notice. Only once again that day was she wounded. She was returning to her room after evening prayers, when among the crowd of girls some one said in a loud whisper:

"Long-sleeved, high-necked. It looks as though it was made for a Hottentot."

Some of the girls laughed, a few cried "for shame," and Miss Curtiss, one of the teachers said:

"That was you, Elizabeth Brent; I shall report you to Mrs. Gordon," and Vashti, hurrying on to her room, burst in, shut the door and bolted it, and tearing off the obnoxious, high-necked, long-sleeved apron, she took up a passionate march about her room, her ears tingling, and her eyes flashing angrily through tears.

"What shall I do! what shall I do!" she said to herself. "I can't wear these things and be laughed at, every hour of the day. What right have these ignorant girls to laugh at me? It is none of their business. I will dress as I please, yes, I will, and I'll wear that ridiculous, despicable, horrid, ugly apron till I choose to leave it off—there! I'm a better scholar than they at any rate. Mr. Thorpe was pleased with me, too. I could see that. Professor Thorpe, Mrs. Gordon says I must call him. I must be careful and not forget. I wouldn't displease him for anything; he is so kind to me."

And thus, in her innocent and consolatory self-felicitations, she forgot her anger.

CHAPTER XV.

A NEW WARDROBE.

That week passed, and another; and still Vashti, in her homely garb, went to and fro, cold, haughty, and silent, save when addressed—among, but not one of them. No one meddled with her, at least not openly; and though with her sensitive spirit, she fancied every laugh or whisper concerned her, she never seemed to notice or resent either, except in what she considered extreme cases. Then her

rebuke was so keenly and bitterly administered, that the offender got out of the way as fast as possible, and was more careful in future.

One hour of each evening the young ladies were suffered to spend in the sitting-room, in conversational recreation, or even a quiet game or two, and every two weeks Mrs. Gordon had what she called a "reception," when the friends of the pupils from the neighboring county town were suffered to spend the evening at Laurel Hill. These were considered as a kind of gala nights by the young ladies, and were looked forward to with much eagerness and anticipation. Vashti, however, never joined them, either at reception or recreation.

As the weeks went on, she drew more and more within herself—grew more taciturn and haughty, and, it must be confessed, more unhappy.

One evening—it was reception evening—she was sitting alone in the dark in one of the music rooms, singing softly to herself and playing an almost indistinct accompaniment. The room was warm; a slumbering fire was on the hearth.

Suddenly a quick step crossed the room, a booted foot struck a shower of sparks and a burst of flame from the smoldering hearth. Vashti was silent, and slipping from the music-stool, was leaving the room, when Professor Thorpe said:

"Vashti!"

She stopped, saying:

"Sir?"

"What are you running away for? Come back."

She obeyed him with evident reluctance, standing before him, and waiting for him to speak, with her hands folded

before her, and her eyes downcast like a little nun, her whole expression a forlorn one.

"Child, what is the matter?"

"Nothing," without lifting her eyes or changing her position.

"If you were anybody else, I should say you were sulky," he said, bluntly. "What makes you so different from other girls? Why are you like nobody else?"

She flashed a sad yet resentful glance at him from under her long lashes.

"Am I so very different?"

"Yes, you are very singular. Don't you know you are, Vashti?"

"I should not want to be like these girls here, sir," she answered, with a backward toss of her graceful head.

"Why not?"

"I don't like them."

"To be sure; that is plainly to be seen; but why don't you like them?"

"They are silly and vain; they care more for a new dress than I do for a whole wardrobe, and their hearts are as hard as the nether millstone."

"Well, well," he said, in a tone of raillery, "I think you must have given this subject some consideration. Vain and silly—well, well."

Some inward thought amused him; he laughed, and Vashti said:

"Did you want anything more, sir?"

"No. What then?"

"Good-evening, sir;" and with the words she vanished noiselessly from the room.

The professor laughed again quietly, saying to himself, emphatically:

"A very singular child, indeed."

* * * * * *

A letter for Vashti. There it lay on her stand; some one had put it there during her absence from the room. A letter—and from Aunt Margery Gresham! It was short, but like Margery's verbal communications, to the point. It ran thus:

"VASHTI:—It seems that you are the butt of ridicule where you are, owing to the style of your dress. You may lay the fault of that to your adorable Miss Dale. She mingles with the world, and knows what people wear in it. I shall send you money, and you can furnish yourself with a suitable wardrobe from the country town—Martineau, I believe they call it. All well. MARGERY GRESHAM."

"That is just like Aunt Margery," soliloquized Vashti; "never a word about mamma or Nora. I don't suppose she ever told them she was writing to me."

A low knock at Vashti's door was followed by the entrance of Mrs. Gordon. She saluted her pupil with a graceful kiss, saying:

"Are you glad, my child?"

"For what—this letter? How did it come?"

"Inclosed in one to me; and your aunt sent me money enough to dress you up beautifully."

"Did you write Aunt Margery about me—did you tell her I was the butt of ridicule here?" cried Vashti, in a grieved tone.

"You must not raise your voice, or speak to me in that manner, dear," said Mrs. Gordon, with a quiet smile. "I believe I said something of the kind; not exactly in hose words, however. I said you were not dressed

suitably, and were subject to great mortification on that account."

"Oh! what made you? What made you tell Aunt Margery Gresham that? It is too bad. I don't care if these girls do laugh at me; let them laugh; I don't care, I say."

"Hush! child; be more respectful. You try not to care, no doubt, but you cannot help caring. But we will have all this different now. To-morrow, you and I will go to Martineau. You shall have such a wardrobe, Vashti, as will place you entirely on equality with any girl here."

"I am on an equality with them now, as much as I should be then. All these fine feathers you tell about will still leave me Vashti Everleigh. Mrs. Gordon, I think you may send that money back to Aunt Margery; my clothes are good enough. Those who do not like them, must look the other way."

Vashti's tone was respectful, but decided. Mrs. Gordon looked confounded. She had not calculated on her pupil proving refractory in such a matter as this. She looked a little displeased, and very much puzzled. She rose to leave the room, saying:

"I hope you will change your mind by morning, dear.'

"I shall not."

"You speak too abruptly, child; I do not like it. I do not usually attempt to control my pupils in matters of dress. I think I shall suffer you to do as you please; but I, for one, shall not like you so well, if you persist in what I must consider mere willfulness."

The next morning, as Vashti was leaving the breakfast-table, Mrs. Gordon put her hand on her arm, saying:

"Shall we go to Martineau to-day?"

"I do not care to go," said Vashti, in a low voice, and with her jetty lashes downcast.

"You are a very foolish girl; I am much displeased with you," said Mrs. Gordon, as her hand dropped from Vashti's arm.

An hour or two after, Vashti knocked at the door of Mrs. Gordon's private sitting-room. The pleasant voice of the lady herself said:

"Come in."

But as Vashti obeyed, she looked up, frowning, and then smiling, thinking she had come to tell her she had repented her decision not to go to Martineau with her.

"Are you going to Martineau to-day?" inquired Vashti.

"Yes, I am going."

"Will you be kind enough to get me one of those quilted cloaks, with a hood—a blue silk hood?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Gordon, smiling; "but why not go with me, and get something else also?"

"I do not want it for myself, ma'am. It is for Violet Granger."

Violet Granger was a little orphan girl, who was being educated at Mrs. Gordon's establishment. A sickly, puny child, whom her friends seemed to concern themselves very little about, for she was often shabbily dressed, and spent all her holidays at Mrs. Gordon's. She was one of the few who had never laughed at Vashti.

"Why should you get a cloak for Violet Granger?" said Mrs. Gordon, in surprise.

"She wants one very much, and I have nothing better to do with the money. Here it is."

She laid it on the table by the lady, but she said:

"Tush! that is your pocket money. I will get the cloak out of what your aunt sent. Won't I return that money to

her, you want to ask? No. I intend to keep it till you come to your senses. Don't you think you had better go with me to-day, after all?"

Vashti shook her head, and retreated to the door.

"Well, if you won't you won't; but don't expect me to feel pleasantly to you, till you give up to do as I wish you to."

Vashti bowed, coloring, and left the room.

From this time, Mrs. Gordon's manner to her willful pupil was quite cool. She had been very kind to her, and Vashti felt her displeasure more than she cared to own.

The Christmas holidays came, and most of the pupils passed them at home, (though Vashti did not,) and came back loaded with presents and finery.

One day, as Vashti was returning from recitation, through the square court which the Laurel Hill buildings inclosed, at an angle of the boarding-house, she came upon a group of girls in fierce dispute. Little Violet Granger, (she was the youngest of them all,) was sobbing bitterly upon the ground, and the remainder of the group seemed divided into two parties, one of which was gathered round the little girl, and the other and smaller one, round Elizabeth Brent, the coarse-featured, sallow-complexioned girl, who had so annoyed Vashti. They were all talking loud and eagerly.

Hearing her own name, Vashti stopped involuntarily. Violet caught sight of her, and darting through the crowd, threw herself into her outstretched arms.

"What is the matter, Violet?" she whispered, folding her close. "Nobody shall hurt you, or grieve you, if I can help it."

"It is not me, it is you they are abusing. I had a great deal rather they would talk about me; and when I told

them so, Elizabeth Brent called me a little pauper, and threatened to strike me."

A vivid color flashed into Vashti's pale face as, with Violet still clinging to her, she took two or three steps toward the now silent group.

Fixing her haughty glance on Elizabeth Brent first, and suffering it to travel thence over the others, she said:

"I do not interfere with you. I never meddle with your pastimes, or your gossips. I have never harmed one of you. It is senseless and idiotic to abuse me, who have given you no cause, but when you, Elizabeth Brent, or any one else, is cruel enough to taunt a little child like Violet Granger, because she defends her friend, I say there is no word strong enough to express the scorn and contempt you deserve."

Vashti's tone and bearing gave a force to her language, before which the group surrounding Elizabeth Brent cowered, looking helplessly to her for a reply to a rebuke they felt was deserved, while the other party of girls, crowding round Violet's champion, became vociferous in their eagerness to disclaim all part or lot in so reprehensible an affair.

Violet was a great favorite with them; they liked Vashti's eloquence, and many of them had only wanted a good and sufficient opportunity to avow themselves friends. There is a dash and fascination about independence, real, or even assumed independence, that always captivates our American girls. There was, moreover, a suspicion abroad among them that Vashti could be wonderfully genial if she chose, and there wasn't a girl among them all, unless it was Elizabeth Brent, but that had felt like throwing up their bonnets and giving three cheers for Vashti when little golden-haired Violet made her appearance with Vashti's present, a cloak and hood, that was the admiration of everybody. All this

enthusiasm had been pent up long enough. The popular feeling had been gradually working round in Vashti's favor, without her being conscious of it, and now, as she looked around upon her excited troop of adherents, she was half inclined to think it all a hoax.

The Brent party was voted down, and, finding itself so much in the minority, quitted the field ingloriously.

As Vashti, surrounded by this strange new homage, passed to the house, she met Professor Thorpe. He was laughing his quiet, excessively-amused laugh; he had witnessed the whole scene evidently, and, as he stepped aside for the brown Holland apron to pass, he lifted his cap with an expressive and humorous glance, saying:

"Queen Vashti!"

Vashti blushed, but could not help laughing. As she ran up the steps the laugh was echoed, as well as Professor Thorpe's exclamation, and before she knew it she was chatting and parrying jokes in the sitting-room—that sitting-room which she had never but once before entered willingly.

How she enjoyed yet shrank from Mrs. Gordon's astonishment, as she came into the room, to see what all the bustle and clatter was about. In her surprise, that lady forgot to deliver the reprimand that was on her lips, and, instead, stood watching the new expressions that were flitting over Vashti's happy face, like sunshine over a somber landscape.

That evening, as Vashti was retiring, Mrs. Gordon came to the door.

"Will you let Violet Granger sleep with you?" she said. "There is a young lady come, and I have no room in readiness for her, unless you take her into yours, and Violet begged hard that she might come to you instead."

"I shall be very glad, Mrs. Gordon."

Mrs. Gordon went away, and in a few minutes Violet came herself, wild with delight. She was a very lovely, affectionate child, and Vashti felt, as she took her in her arms, that she had found one joy more.

She began, however, to wish that Mrs. Gordon would renew the subject of a new wardrobe. She began to long eagerly to put off brown Holland, and dress as the others did. But Mrs. Gordon treated her with such marked coolness of late that she had no courage to approach her about it.

As if to doubly aggravate her, the very next day, Mrs. Gordon went to Martineau. This evening was a reception evening, and more than ordinary preparations were going on for it, owing to the expected presence of some rather distinguished visitors. Some of the girls were to play and sing, there was to be a little bit of theatrical performance, some charades, and calisthenic exercises. Everybody's head was full of it. Lessons went off dully, and finally in the afternoon were abandoned altogether. Vashti's newly-declared friends were unceasing in their entreaties that she would consent to attend.

To tell the truth, she was anxious to do so, but she had before this refused to join in any of the arrangements being made, and had not now the courage to go in her usual dress, or make any effort to obtain materials for a different toilet. So she shrank away to her own room as evening approached, trying in vain to keep from loving little Violet the knowledge of how foolishly anxious she was to join the merry crowd in the parlor.

"If I had not been so willful," she said to herself, as she sat alone, trying hard to keep back the tears.

"Confess now, dear, you would like very much to go into the parlor to-night."

It was Mrs. Gordon, who had stolen unnoticed into the room, and coming up behind Vashti, put her two fair, plump hands on her shoulders.

Vashti blushed and hung her head.

"You would like it, I know, but you don't like to own it. Vashti, you have very pretty hair—I should like to see how it would look dressed differently. Will you let Miss Brand arrange your hair, just to gratify me?"

"You may come in, Miss Brand."

Miss Brand came in smiling, a formidable array of brushes and combs with her, and, in spite of Vashti's low-voiced opposition, proceeded with deft and skillful hands to unbraid and brush out her long, black hair, both she and Mrs. Gordon exclaiming at its beauty and length.

"Stand up!" said Mrs. Gordon.

Vashti obeyed, and the shining waves wrapped her slender person like a mantle.

"Now, Miss Brand"—with a significant look—"let us see what you can do."

"There is little left for me to do," said Miss Brand, gayly, but she parted and brushed, and brushed and parted, and braided, till Vashti doubted the assertion somewhat.

"Nobody would know her," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, as Miss Brand finished disposing the satiny bands about the clear, oval face. "Why, Vashti, you have only just missed being a beauty. Be quick, Miss Brand."

Miss Brand laughed and darted out of the room, while Mrs. Gordon, with a mixture of abruptness and raillery, said :

"I want you in the parlor to-night, Vashti, and I intend to have you there."

Miss Brand was back in a second or two, with what looked like an armful of sunbeams. She flashed it down upon the bed, and armed with soap, towels, and water, went deftly over Vashti, whirled off the brown Holland apron and short dress, substituted the armful of sunbeams, and called on Mrs. Gordon to look and admire.

As for Vashti, she wondered secretly if she was not a princess in a fairy tale; and when Miss Brand proceeded to fit an embroidered stocking and a dainty satin slipper to her foot, she concluded she must be Cinderella over again.

"There, I think you will do," said Mrs. Gordon, when all was done. "Come, dear."

But Vashti hung back.

"What now?" said Mrs. Gordon, taking her by the hand.

There was a rush of tears and a flush of scarlet, and with with quivering lips, Vashti said:

"I'm sorry I was so willful, Mrs. Gordon. I don't at all deserve what you have done for me."

"You didn't, but you do now," said Mrs. Gordon, kissing her. "There, put by those tears for the present; and if you wish to make amends for displeasing me, as you really did, just banish all those little bashful airs you have such a penchant for, and whatever you are asked to do this evening toward entertaining my guests, do freely and fearlessly. I like to be proud of my pupils, Vashti, and when you make me proud of you, you gratify me more than I can tell you."

"But, you know there are some things I couldn't do if they asked me," said Vashti, frightened at the mere idea of being called upon for she knew not what.

"Don't undertake anything you can't do, by any means. But I know what you can do, quite as well as you do, and I shall have my eyes on you."

They entered the parlor. It was yet early—earlier than Vashti had supposed. The pupils were all there, and most of the teachers, but no guests had yet arrived. Vashti got a seat in as retired a corner as possible, and wondered if she was really herself, as she stole sly looks at her amber draperies, and slippered foot. She was not left long in the obscurity she had chosen, however. The tide of popularity that had set in, received additional impetus at sight of her gorgeousness.

Half a dozen girls on either hand, forced her into the center of the room, to be admired. As she at last succeeded in disengaging herself from them, covered with blushes and confusion, she encountered Professor Thorpe, ushering in a party of ladies and gentlemen. He bowed slightly, with that droll smile of his, and sent her to a seat, in a perfect flutter of embarrassment.

"How he will tease me!" she said to herself with a sigh.

The party took their seats a little way from her, and when she had sufficiently recovered her presence of mind to glance that way, Professor Thorpe seemed in close conversation with a lady whom Vashti pronounced the most beautiful she had ever seen. Professor Thorpe himself was tall, rather above the medium height, straight for a student, with rather plain, but not homely features, what we call a square face, straight, dark hair, thrown carelessly back from his ample forehead, which projected slightly over a pair of deepest azure eyes.

The lady was sufficiently good-looking, fair-complexioned, with curls about her face, a little red in her cheeks and lips, a great deal of blue in her eyes, and evidently by the

way she tossed her curls and "made eyes" at the professor, considered herself quite a beauty, and him a conquest.

The company came in rapidly, and the parlor was soon quite full. The young ladies were not allowed to mingle yet with the company, but were mustered in a large, deep recess at one side—all but Vashti. She, not understanding the arrangement, kept her quiet seat, secluded, she thought, from general observation.

Presently Mrs. Gordon came sailing through the room, benignant, smiling, looking well, in a pale blue silk, which became her exceedingly. She passed by the professor, and spoke an instant with him in a low tone. He nodded, sent a sharp glance toward Vashti's hiding-place, and while Mrs. Gordon waited, chattering with one and another, took the bewildered girl out of the crowd, and brought her to the lady.

Mrs. Gordon waved her hand for him to lead her on, and gracefully excusing herself, followed them.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Vashti, timidly, of the professor.

He had quietly taken possession of her, without any explanation.

"Going to cage you as they do birds, and then have you sing."

"I sing! I sing!" she cried, remembering what Mrs. Gordon had said, and in so dolorous a tone, that he looked curiously at her, saying:

"Why, I thought you young ladies liked such things."

"What things, Mr. Thorpe—Professor?" she hastily corrected herself. "You don't mean that I am to sing before all this crowd?"

"Yes, I do; so Madame Gordon just told me. You are to open this, what do you call it—grand gallopade of the

Muses—with a song and instrumental accompaniment."

She was silent, and looking down he saw she was very pale. He drew her aside into the hall through a door opening from the recess in which the stage was erected. Mrs. Gordon was following, but he raised his hand with a warning gesture, and a significant look at Vashti. Mrs. Gordon, however, pressed on.

"She will never be able to do it," she said, in a disappointed tone.

"Yes, she will," said the professor, decidedly. "Delay commencing ten minutes, and I will bring her to you. She will do it, I insure."

"My dear child, if you knew how it would gratify me."

Vashti did not reply, and the professor, with her hand upon his arm, took two or three turns through the hall.

"I am sorry you promised that, sir," she said, at last. "I am afraid I shall disappoint you. It is quite too much to ask of me, who never attended anything of this kind before in my life."

"So you have found your voice," he said, gleefully, "and only three minutes gone. In seven more you'll have a heart as bold as a lion's."

"I don't know about that, sir. My heart is beating now like that little caged bird's you were telling me of a while ago."

"I dare say, but, you see, this has to be done; so the sooner you quiet that fluttering thing the better."

They took a few turns more, he railing at her and familiarizing her with the subject that had frightened her, as we familiarize any scared thing with the shadow that has terrified it. Pausing by a lamp, he said, perusing her face an instant :

"There, I should like to see you fail! Don't you dare do it. Are you ready to go in now?"

"Yes, sir, if I must; but what am I to sing? Oh, I never thought of that. What is it, sir?"

"There, there; keep cool. It is only that little song about birds, and blossoms, and waterfalls. A moonish serenade, I believe, they call it. You'll find the music on the piano. I've heard you sing it often. Up with you, and if you fail, Vashti Everleigh, I'll cross you out of my book."

He handed her up the steps, led her to the piano, and seated her, keeping up a fire of low bantering words all the time to divert her attention from embarrassing thoughts. He placed the music before her. It was the wrong sheet, and she pointed out the mistake to him. Placing the right one before her, he said:

"See how nervous I am lest you should fail. It would vex me terribly."

"Would it, indeed?"

"Yes."

He stepped to one side a little, and as her hand fell on the keys in a musical flutter of notes, the room was hushed in an instant to perfect quietness, and up through the tender murmuring of the prelude stole a voice, at first faint and tremulous, but very sweet, and gathering strength and compass as it went.

Not till she had finished, and the last breath of melody had floated away over the room, did she lift her eyes from the music. Then looking upon the throng from her elevated position, she felt faint, and swayed slightly in her seat. Professor Thorpe stepped quietly to her side, lifted the hand that lay as if paralyzed on the piano keys, and placing it on his arm, led her away.

She recovered her presence of mind instantly, as his hand touched her, and as soon as they reached the hall, said:

"Did I do well, sir?"

"I believe you did; I'm not much of a musician myself, but I believe you did very well. Here is Mrs. Gordon, ask her."

Mrs. Gordon came hurrying out, all smiles and congratulations.

Twice again during the evening, Vashti sang and played, to the satisfaction of everybody.

The theatricals, charades, and calisthenic exercises passed off well. The company had mostly dispersed. Vashti was sitting in an easy-chair before the fire. Professor Thorpe came and stood at one side of the hearth, nearly in front of her, his hands in his pockets, as he surveyed her quizzically.

"Now, then, it is coming," thought Vashti, and aloud she said: "Please, sir, don't laugh at me."

"Why not?"

"It is not pleasant to be laughed at."

"Isn't it? Well, I'm sorry, but I can't help laughing, when I think that it is not so very long since you were railing in unmeasured terms at people who wore fine clothes; and now you seem to enjoy the peacock's plumes as much as anybody."

Vashti was silent, and looked annoyed. Presently she rose, stood a moment hesitating, the parlor was nearly empty, and said, timidly:

"May I bid you good-evening, sir?"

"Good-morning, you mean; it is nearer that than the other. Yes, off with you; the old professor is nobody now. You are too fine for old friends."

She stood looking away from him, but at these words,

spoken in a most doleful tone, she turned again toward him. He was standing now, shading his face with his hand, so that she could not see its expression. She came a step tuward him, looking doubtful.

"I believe you are laughing at me, sir; but it grieves me to hear you talk so, even in fun."

"Why? It is the truth, isn't it?"

"No sir, no; I think you are the best friend I have got, except mamma and Nora."

"You feel cross at me sometimes; I can see it in your downcast eye. It shines irefully upon me from between your lashes."

"You tease me so, sir, and I don't like to be teased."

"Don't you? You would rather I flattered you, wouldn't you?"

"No, that I would not. I would rather have stripes than flattery," she answered, curving her red lips.

He laughed his inward, quiet laugh.

"There, I think you will do to finish up on. Good-by. Shake hands, to show that we are friends."

He held out his open hand. She laid hers in it, said good-night, and went away.

"Professor Thorpe, what do you mean?"

It was Mrs. Gordon. She had come in at a side door, unobserved, she thought, and had heard the latter portion of this peculiar conversation.

He did not start at her voice; he had known she was there all the time.

"What do you think, Mrs. Gordon?"

"That you are a very singular pair. What a conversation to take place between a girl of fourteen and the learned professor."

"Sure enough, she is a singular child, and you have al-

ways called me odd. Are you aware, Mrs. Gordon, that she has more mind than any dozen girls here?"

"She has uncommon talents, certainly.

"Uncommon intellect, you mean. I never saw just such a child in my life. There is a fascination about her that even these wild girls acknowledge. She will make a wonderful woman, Mrs. Gordon."

"A belle, eh?"

"No, she is too grave for a belle—haughty—proud—I don't know what to call it—a strange, sensitive, shy thing. Good-night, Mrs. Gordon."

"Good-morning, professor, by the clock," pointing gayly to the time-piece in the hall.

He nodded, smiling, and was gone. His rooms were in an upper story of one of the seminary buildings.

CHAPTER XVI.

ELIZABETH BRENT AGAIN.

The day after the reception school-hours were resumed, or an attempt made to that effect. There were a great many failures at recitations, however, but Vashti was resolved not to fail at this particular time, and did not.

Elizabeth Brent had been ill at the time of the reception, but recovered in a few days after.

Vashti was almost sorry to see her back among her companions, and no wonder. The girl had a scowling, discontented face, which was only the reflex of her envious heart; but Vashti had no malice, and in her present happy frame of mind she could afford to be generous; so she met this

girl, who had proved herself so unfriendly, with a kindly face and courteous expressions. Elizabeth Brent, however, refused her proffered hand, saying, angrily :

"I have never liked you, and I never will—don't speak to me, Miss Everleigh."

Vashti's dark eyes flashed a contemptuous glance at her, and with a haughty inclination of her head, she turned away. The two passed each other after that with averted eyes.

One evening, about a week after the reception, as Vashti sat alone in her room studying, Violet came softly in, and sat down without approaching light or fire. Presently her friend looked up.

"Why don't you come to the fire, Violet?"

"Pretty soon I will."

Vashti's quick ear detected something wrong in her tone, and she said :

"Come here and tell me what is the matter, darling—something has grieved you."

The child came reluctantly, but threw herself into her friend's arms, sobbing violently.

"It is not true, I know—I know it can't be."

"What is not true?" said Vashti, tenderly soothing her.

"What they say about you. I did not mean to tell you, but you would make me when you saw I was crying. I don't want to tell you one bit. It is nothing but one of Libbie Brent's lies."

"But you must tell me, Violet. I want to know very much. I have noticed for a day or two that there was a great deal of whispering and a great many sly looks—tell me what it is, Violet. I am not at all afraid of anything she can say about me."

"She has made the girls believe it, some of them. She hates you so bad, Vashti."

"Does she? Well, I don't like her any too well; but what has she been telling now? Out with it."

"Did you know where Libbie Brent went at the holidays?"

"No; I don't even know where her friends live, or whether she has any, and I care less."

"She knows about yours, though, or pretends she does. She visited at a place that she calls Hart Corners at the holidays. She says that is only a little way from Everleigh."

"It is six miles from Everleigh."

"Well, she says she saw some one there that told her—oh, a dreadful tale about—about your father."

Vashti started, her face wearing a look of shocked surprise. Violet put her loving arms about her neck, kissing her, and crying:

"Don't cry darling. Tell me what she said."

Vashti spoke as if her voice was choked with tears.

"I don't want to tell you; it will make you feel so bad. It was a dreadful, dreadful story!"

"Violet, you don't know how you vex me with this delay; tell me, this instant, what this dreadful story is. I can imagine—but tell me——"

She put the child down from her lap, as she spoke, and with her hands on her shoulders, held her with a hard, tight grasp, while she answered her with a scared face:

"She said your father killed a man, and then killed himself, for fear he'd be hung for it."

"Vashti's hands fell away from the child's shoulders—she pushed her almost violently from her, and rising, went straight to the door, her face dark with passionate anger.

"Oh, don't, dear, dear Vashti—where are you going?"

She took the child's clinging hands from her dress, saying:

"I am going to give that creature a lesson. Let me go, Violet."

Through the hall, and up the stairs. Elizabeth Brent's room was in the story above hers. In the upper hall she encountered Mrs. Gordon.

"Whither away, Vashti?" she said, lightly; and then as the blaze of her lamp fell on her face, and she saw its strange expression, she exclaimed: "What is the matter? How you do look! I never saw you look so!"

"I want to see Elizabeth Brent a moment," said Vashti, turning her face from the light.

"You and Elizabeth are not friends—what should you want to see her for? No, Vashti, go back to your room."

"Mrs. Gordon, I must see Elizabeth Brent—I must see her."

"What for?"

"Because I must."

"You must not in the state you are. I will not have it. Go back to your room."

It was on Vashti's passionate lips to say, "I will not," but there was a cool determination in Mrs. Gordon's blue eyes that checked the foolish words, and she suffered herself to be led back to her room. Mrs. Gordon put her in, shut the door, and went away.

Violet sprang to meet her with a cry of joy; the poor child had feared she knew not what, but Vashti put her coldly aside, without a word, and took up an excited walk about the room. Presently she again approached the door, opened it, and went out. She encountered no one in the hall this time, and groping her way to Elizabeth Brent's

room, threw the door open without so much as a knock. There were half a dozen girls within. Mrs. Gordon was there, and Elizabeth Brent was talking eagerly.

Mrs. Gordon turned toward the door as Vashti opened it, and approaching her quickly, with a countenance of much displeasure, said, as she attempted to lead her out of the room :

"Foolish girl, you must not come here."

"Yes, I must!" she cried, wrenching her hand away. "You are in the plot against me, too. I will speak—I will! I will!"

She fled round the table to where Elizabeth Brent stood, with a very pale and somewhat frightened face.

"Wretch!" she cried, seizing her by the arm, "what made you tell that infamous lie? What makes you follow me up so? You're not fit to live!"

Mrs. Gordon came round and took hold of the excited girl. Elizabeth Brent had not spoken a word, but was trying feebly to extricate herself.

"Come with me, Vashti, come right away," said Mrs. Gordon, in a low, quiet voice. "Vashti," her hand was on her shoulder, not heavily; she shook her gently. "Come, my child."

"Make her take back her wicked falsehood first."

"You are not to dictate terms to me, child."

"I don't wish to, Mrs. Gordon," she said, loosing Elizabeth Brent's arm, and turning to Mrs. Gordon with a pitiful look; "but this girl follows me up with her bitter lies. I cannot endure it. Make her say she has lied."

"Vashti, you must come with me."

"Mrs. Gordon, if you have a spark of pity in your heart, ask that girl if she has not lied." Mrs. Gordon looked at Vashti in silence. She stood half drooping be-

fore her, a round red spot on either cheek, and her dusky eyes burning with frenzied imploring. The half dozen girls in the room shrank close to each other, breathless with excited expectation, and Elizabeth Brent, as if unable to stand, sank into a seat. "Just ask her, Mrs. Gordon."

It is difficult to tell what were Mrs. Gordon's thoughts. Possibly she thought the girl was so nearly distracted that she had better humor her. At any rate, turning to Elizabeth Brent, she said:

"You are terribly to blame, Elizabeth, for circulating a story of this kind among your schoolmates, whether it is true or not."

"It is not true," broke in Vashti; "she knows it is not."

"I don't know that it is not true," said Elizabeth, sullenly, and beginning to cry. "I'm sure it is no fault of mine, if folks do say her father killed a man, and——"

She did not finish the sentence. With a sharp cry, Vashti struck the girl's insulting lips with her open palm.

Nobody spoke in the room for several seconds. Vashti's passion seemed to have all gone out of her with that stinging blow; and when Mrs. Gordon, with a very, very grave face, said, "Come away to your room, Vashti," she followed her, perfectly subdued and looking half ashamed.

Subdued and ashamed, she looked so, truly; but when Mrs. Gordon, as she left her at the door, said:

"I leave you to your own thoughts for the present. In the morning I shall expect you to have come to yourself sufficiently to ask not only my pardon for your conduct, but that of the school whose decorum you have broken in upon, as well as that of the girl you struck."

Vashti turned in the doorway, a smoldering spark in her eye, as she answered:

"Your pardon I ask now. I should have restrained myself in your presence. Even as regards the school, though it has only outraged me ever since I have been here, I will obey you; but for Elizabeth Brent, shall I ask her to pardon me for what I would do every hour in the day, under the same circumstances? Never! Mrs. Gordon, I will not do it. I will go back home first."

"Very well; since that is your decision, you will go back home, then. I leave you to think of it till morning."

Vashti bowed, and closed the door.

Poor Violet heard enough of the conversation to understand that there was danger of her losing the best friend she ever had.

"How I wish I had never told you a word!" she cried, sobbing upon the carpet. "I would never, never have told you, if I had thought it would come to this."

"Somebody would have told me, Violet. You are not the least in fault. Come, dear, it is time you were in bed. On the whole, I am not so very sorry. You know I have suffered much that is hard to bear since I have been here. Certainly Elizabeth Brent and I could not possibly continue to meet daily as we have done. Yes, it is best that I should go."

Violet suffered her to get her ready for bed, a little duty it pleased Vashti to attend to, every night.

Vashti brought her book and the lamp to the beside, and holding Violet's hand, pretended to be studying, till the child, after a long time, cried herself to sleep. Presently she rose softly, placed the lamp where its light would not fall on the sleeper, and proceeded with guarded movements to pack her trunk. Afterward she lay down, but though it

was late, she found it impossible to sleep ttll nearly day. Then she dropped to sleep for an hour or two.

She was roused by the first breakfast-bell, and waking with a start and a sigh, proceeded to dress herself with a weary heart, and despondent spirits. Violet was already up, and had kindled a bright fire on the hearth. Her little face was very sorrowful, and she could hardly look at Vashti's trunk without tears. They burst forth resistlessly when she saw her lay out her hood, cloak, furs, and gloves.

"You can't go to-day," she cried.

"I don't know. I shall go as soon as possible."

She sat down, with her arms around Violet.

"I shall miss you, darling," she said, "quite as much as you will miss me; and remember, if you should ever want a friend, such a one as myself, for instance, come to Everleigh. I've a dear mamma there, and a brother and sister, all of whom I will divide with you; and, oh Violet, you can come and spend your vacations with me, instead of staying here as you generally do. Such fine times as we will have!"

Violet could only kiss her in reply, and very soon they went down to breakfast. Afterward Vashti was summoned to Mrs. Gordon's sitting-room, where she only repeated what she had said the night before, announcing her desire and readiness to start for home immediately.

"You cannot go before to-morrow," Mrs. Gordon said. "You are too late to reach the stage at Martineau to-day, as it goes just about this time. Besides, I must write your aunt a statement of this unhappy affair."

"I have a mother, Mrs. Gordon. Had you not better direct your statement to her?"

"Your mother is too much of an invalid to attend to such matters, your aunt said. I should think you would

dislike to displease her, of all others, with so disgraceful a recital."

"*Disgraceful*, Mrs. Gordon?"

"*Disgraceful*, Vashti."

"I was uncourteous to you, Mrs. Gordon, for which I made the apology you demanded. It was a fault of the moment, but I see nothing disgraceful about that or anything else that I did last night."

"Perverse child! You will at least acknowledge that it is disgraceful to be sent home, as you are about to be."

"Not sent home, Mrs. Gordon. I could stay if I chose, could I not?"

"If you accepted the conditions, you could?"

"Which I do not; I choose to go home—I am not sent."

"It amounts to the same thing," said Mrs. Gordon, looking at the girl curiously, and trying in vain to be angry.

Vashti's whole attitude, though firm, was not at all defiant, but on the contrary, rather subdued and despondent.

"I believe you are sorry to go home after all," Mrs. Gordon said, with a half smile.

"Indeed I am, ma'am; I would much rather stay."

"Why not stay?"

"I am not sorry I struck Elizabeth Brent, Mrs. Gordon, nor ever shall be. Besides, if she and I both staid, I am afraid you would have another 'disgraceful affair' on hand before long."

She spoke with sober earnestness, and Mrs. Gordon, checking the smile that rose involuntarily to her lips, said:

"You are a singular child. I was very angry with you last night, but can't for my life be angry this morning. I

had much rather you would stay, Vashti. Can't I convince you that you were wrong last night?"

"No, ma'am."

"Why not? May I try?"

"I had rather you would not. You could not convince me, because I do not want to be convinced."

"A frank avowal, at least; it atones somewhat for your perverseness. You have twice vexed me terribly, Vashti, since you have been here. You are too stormy a spirit for me to control; but I confess to you, child, that, though I do not like your faults, I like you. You have wonderful talents, dear, and a wonderful power of fascination when you are yourself, and choose to exercise it; but this wayward, imperious spirit you have got obscures all your perfections. You can never be very happy till you have curbed it. You can go nowhere, you can have intercourse with no one, but sooner or later it will come between you and them, and in the end blast your life. My child, let us part friends. I shall always remember you kindly. I will inquire to-day for some one who may be going in the direction of Everleigh. I must write that letter, too, to your aunt. You don't like that idea, I see; but you must realize that, looking upon your fault in the light I do, I could not feel I was doing my duty unless I made known so glaring an exhibition of it to your friends."

Vashti had stood quite silent during the whole time of Mrs. Gordon's speaking, her face crowded with conflicting emotions. From any one else she would have resented such a pointed discourse upon her "great fault," but this lady's tone was so gentle, her affection so genuine, that her words moved Vashti as no other appeal had ever done, or would again soon. Perhaps, possibly, if she could have remained under the superintendence of so sincere a friend,

so honest an adviser, she might have escaped the furnace-blasts of tribulation that tried her proud spirit in after years, and wrung her rebellious heart to agony.

CHAPTER XVII.

HO! FOR EVERLEIGH.

Vashti had said "Good-by" to all the girls, and was going off at last, very much regretted. The girls crowded round her, each eager to testify her appreciation of her and load her with testimonials of kindness.

Mrs. Gordon was to go with her to Martineau ; the sleigh was at the door, but there was one to whom she had not yet been able to say good-by.

Professor Thorpe had not been at the boarding-house all day, and with her usual readiness to appropriate disagreeable things, Vashti concluded that, having received a report of her conduct, he meant to show his displeasure by absenting himself from all chance of a kind word to her.

"It is not like him," she said to herself, discontentedly. "He has been very kind to me, kinder than all of them. I wish he wouldcome."

She stood in the hall near the parlor door, which was ajar. Suddenly she heard voices, one them that of Professor Thorpe. She heard him say :

"I have never happened to see any open indications of her fiery spirit, save when she was terribly imposed upon, and then she answered her tormentors so aptly that I felt like giving her three cheers ; but if, as you say, she is given to such outbursts of passion as this you tell me of, it is a ter-

rible blot upon her singular perfection of intellect and attraction. If she were a young lady now, and I a marrying man, I should be decidedly afraid of her. A vixen, Mrs. Gordon, is what I would not like to risk getting in a wife."

The speaker was approaching the door, and Vashti retreated from its vicinity. Indeed she had heard quite enough, and in the first emotion of confusion and annoyance she looked about for any corner to hide herself from his eyes.

At the end of the staircase was a shadowed corner. Hardly knowing what she was doing, she slipped into it just as Professor Thorpe came through the parlor door. His cool eye took a rapid survey of the groups in the hall. Whether he missed the dark, piquant face that usually brightened with a faint glow at his coming, did not appear. He fell into a light and desultory chat with Mrs. Gordon for a while, and when she went away to her room for some article she had forgotten, he began to pace silently and with a slow step through the hall, his heavy brows knitted a little, and his eyes thoughtful.

From her corner Vashti could see him, and fearing every instant lest that keen glance should fall upon her, she attempted, when his face was turned from her, to slip away. She had not taken two stealthy steps before he wheeled upon her with his quiet laugh.

"What are you hiding for?" he said, intercepting her. "A pretty escapade this. I had no idea you were of such combustible material, Vashti."

"Let me go to Mrs. Gordon, please; she is calling me," she answered, reddening, and with her downcast eyes full of tears.

"Mrs. Gordon can wait. It is not likely I shall ever have a chance to tease you again."

"It is too bad of you to talk so," she cried, with a passionate burst of weeping. "I could bear anything better than this. I believe you are glad I am going."

He lookad at her with a curious smile, glanced over his shoulder, and said:

"You are mistaken, and you know you are; you don't believe anything of the kind. You know Professor Thorpe likes you, after his fashion, pretty well. Will that do? Do you forgive me for plaguing you?"

She smiled faintly through her tears, saying, in a low voice:

"I don't care for the rest, if you like me; and I should not blame you if you didn't, for I don't think I am very likable, sir, only you have been so kind to me, that—I—I thought—I hoped you would miss me—a little."

"I shall; there, Mrs. Gordon is getting impatient. Good-by, Vashti Everleigh."

"Good-by, sir."

He led her out, placed her in the sled, assisted Mrs. Gordon in, put Violet up for a last kiss, the driver snapped his whip, Professor Thorpe raised his hat, the girls waved their bonnets and handkerchiefs, bells jingled, etc.

Ho! for Everleigh.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MEANWHILE AT EVERLEIGH.

Meanwhile at Everleigh, time had not moved by any means smoothly. Everybody, to quote Vashti, was "out of sorts."

Frank had taken it into his head to follow his oldest sister's example, and go away to school. He was tired of being schooled by woman, he declared, and as in Vashti's case, opposition only strengthened his determination. Off he went in midwinter, to the preparatory school at New Haven, in spite of Miss Margery Gresham. Always grave, she grew somber at these inroads upon her rule.

Miss Dale, from having failed so signally in her plan of becoming prime minister to Mrs. Everleigh, was subject to continued and repeated attacks of fidgets, greatly to the annoyance of Miss Margery and Nora particularly, for during these seasons she managed to make herself quite disagreeable to both. People she did not like, Miss Dale had a wonderful faculty of annoying; or rather, people who did not like her. Often she asked of Miss Gresham the most impudent questions, questions that blanched her face with a singular emotion, that Miss Dale could not for her life put an interpretation on, or give name to, but with so innocent, and even blundering an air, as to quite banish from Miss Gresham's mind all suspicion as to her intentions. "Stupid," was the severest expression Miss Gresham ever applied to Miss Dale.

Mrs. Everleigh missed her children; the poor invalid lady was very fond of Frank's bright, dashing face and ways; and her eldest born, her Vashti, with all her waywardness, made too much stir amid the monotony of her sickly existence not to be sadly missed. Besides, her little loving Nora had changed singularly. The sweet, winsome face drooped somehow so sadly, and she went about with a strange, slow step, very unlike her usual bounding elasticity. If not sorrowful, she was at least thoughtful to pensiveness. The fact was that the child, inheriting with her brother and sister an exquisitively sensi-

tive and susceptible temperament, could not obey Leon and drop out of her mind all that it nearly broke her heart to think of. It seemed to her every time her aunt's heavy gray eyes fell upon her, that she, too, was constantly thinking of the Everleigh doom. As she went in and out through the strange, shadowy corridors she could fancy she heard Margery Gresham's cold, yet tremulous tones repeating the words that still haunted her, and, covering her ears in a frenzy of terror, she fled away, anywhere—to her mother's room sometimes, often to her own, for Miss Dale frequented Mrs. Everleigh's room very much, and between her and Nora rivers of antipathy flowed fathoms wide. Nora could not have given, if she had tried, any very distinctive reason why she so disliked this woman, but she never approached her save when compelled by necessity. School-hours were spent mostly beneath her dictation, and were weary hours for this very reason.

She heard from Leon occasionally—as often, indeed, as she could expect. Brave, tender, true-hearted letters he wrote, bright and genial as himself; but strange to say, in her then depressed state of mind, as she turned from the glowing page, the shadows about her steps seemed to become thicker and darker from very contrast. She tried hard, in answering these letters, to write cheerfully; but she was of too frank a nature to easily conceal her pain from so keen and kindly an eye as Leon's. He felt with a throb of sympathy every thread of suffering that filled the woof of her young, so early stricken life, and he wrote on this subject brief, emphatic sentences that thrilled her to tenderly joyous tears while she read.

"There will come a time," he wrote—"there will come a time, my little Nora, when you will be so utterly miserable and unhappy, when you feel yourself falling away into

such depths of affliction, when the waters of a despair peculiarly your own will hem you round so close, that you, poor, weary child, will be compelled to follow *the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night*, as those old Israelites did. It will be your only redemption. My child, you can do nothing of yourself. When you realize this, and cease to struggle against God's ways, then will come the beginning of the end you ought to attain. It is not for you to trouble yourself about the future. It is for you to do as near right as you know how. 'Our Father, Who art in Heaven,' will take care of the rest. Meanwhile, work, work, work. There is nothing better for the mind than to keep the hands busy."

And Nora pondered and mourned, and mourned and pondered, and tried to follow the dictation, but not hopefully. Alas! physically and mentally she had reached a state of prostration that would not suffer her to hope, but still trying to do her work faithfully, and leave the rest in Better Hands.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT HOME.

It was the last of February, and Vashti had been from home a little over three months. One evening Nora was sitting in Mrs. Everleigh's room, reading to her. They sat before the fire, Nora's little dimpled hand in her mother's thin and slender clasp. Now and then she paused for little running comments on what she was reading, to which Mrs. Everleigh gave low, smiling replies.

Presently in came Miss Dale. Nora just glanced at her and read on, a little cloud resting on her face. Mrs. Everleigh motioned Miss Dale to a seat near her. Affecting not to see it, Miss Dale moved round to Nora, saying, in her smooth tones :

"My darling Nora, how tired you must be of reading; your voice sounds hoarse, positively. Give me the book. Your dear mother thinks nobody can read quite as well as I."

"I'm not tired in the least," began Nora, in displeasure.

Mrs. Everleigh interrupted her with :

"Give Miss Dale the book, dear. I dare say you are not tired, but it will be a fine thing for you to hear her, and improve yourself by doing so."

"Aunt Margery says one always gains more by practice than by listening to other people," said Nora, stoutly, yielding the book however to Miss Dale.

Mrs. Everleigh looked a little annoyed and undecided, but soon forgot it, listening to Miss Dale's vibrating tones.

Nora sat a few minutes with her curls drooping over her shadowed face, and then stole softly from the room, with a caution quite unnecessary, since Mrs. Everleigh was too engrossed to have seen her, had she made considerable noise. The sitting-room was alight and aglow with warmth. Thither she went, and taking her favorite low seat before the fire, with her hands falling idly on her lap, watched the red glow in the grate, with sadly wistful eyes, pondering—she, the little child, not yet numbering a dozen years—pondering the terrible problem Margery Gresham had so unwittingly flung in her path.

Born to an inheritance of idiocy or madness! If she did not grasp the appalling idea with the mind of an adult, she clothed this, her terror, with a vague, but quite as dread-

ful horror of imagery and surroundings. It frightened her sometimes till it seemed to her she must die. Rising with a sudden impulse of her inward thought, she took the lamp from a side-table, and holding it aloft, so as to throw its light as much as possible on the picture over the mantel-piece, she looked long and earnestly at that dark, handsome face with its heavy-lashed eyes. She often studied this picture thus, and she was beginning to understand what was the hidden language it spoke—and every time she lifted her gaze to that gaze, her heart thrilled with deeper sympathy to the nameless, but unutterable pain, that darkened there.

"Poor papa," she murmured to herself, "he knew, of course he knew, how sad it must be to live so long as he did, knowing what it must come to at last. I wonder if God won't let me die young? It seems to me it would be a great deal better so. I wonder if papa was glad to die. If he had lived much longer, perhaps——"

She looked wildly at the picture, shuddering, set the lamp down with a trembling hand, and flung herself with a dreary moan upon the floor.

There was a noise in the great hall soon after, subdued tones of greeting, the sound of approaching footsteps, none of which pierced to her numbed ears with any realizing sense, and then the door of the sitting-room fell open, and Vashti Everleigh came in, saying, as she crossed the threshold, to the servant who accompanied her:

"Don't tell anybody I've come, Elise."

Elise bowed and closed the door after her.

At the first tones of her sister's voice Nora had started from the floor, wondering if she were not dreaming.

Vashti came slowly toward her, loosening and throwing back her hood, holding out hand, with a feeble smile that

so touched some sympathetic chord in Nora's heart that she burst into tears, crying:

Vashti! oh, Vashti! have you come back to me?"

"I have come back, Nora, because I had to come," she answered, with a tone of haughtiness, but with crowding tears flashing upon her cheeks, as she kissed her sister and submitted to have her loosen and remove her wrappings.

When she had laid these by, Nora took her low seat again, her hand in Vashti's, asking eager questions.

"I have learned," said Vashti, with slow emphasis, "the lesson Aunt Margery has all our lives been trying to drum into our heads, namely, that we Everleighs are like nobody else. Don't you know we have heard sometimes that the Everleighs never prospered when they left the old place? I thought I could go away shaking its dust from my feet, and have nobody find out but what I was just like other folks; but couldn't—this Everleigh stamp is as indelible as it is misty, to my mind. I didn't want to come back; I hate the very sight of Everleigh. I hate the place I went to quite as much, though, and I am glad you didn't go. Such indignities as I endured, till it seemed as though I should go crazy. I came away because I could submit to them no longer; and there, Nora, let us drop the subject. Don't ever ask me a question; I can't bear to talk of it—I don't want to hear of it. Where's Frank—with mamma?"

"No; he has gone to preparatory school at New Haven."

"Frank has?"

"Yes; Aunt Margery opposed it with all her might, but he would go, and at last she gave it up; but she is cross about it yet."

"Well, well," answered Vashti, thoughtfully; and after an interval of silence, she said: "Is mamma up yet?

How is she? Well, I suppose, as usual, for I got a letter to that effect just before I started. Is she strong enough to see me without any warning?"

"I don't know. I had better go in first and tell her. You can wait outside the door."

Without looking at Miss Dale, Nora entered her mother's room, and, according to her wont, with her arms thrown lightly round her neck, said in her ear:

"Mamma, I have heard from Vashti."

"Heard from Vashti? How—have you got a letter?"

"No; but I have heard. Vashti is coming home, mamma?"

Miss Dale dropped her book in her surprise, and Mrs. Everleigh brightened up from her languid, half reclining posture, to say:

"Are you sure, Nora? How do you know?"

"From her own lips. Vashti is already here, mamma. Yes, she is, in the hall there."

Vashti, unable to restrain herself longer, came in, half dignity, half impulsive joy, at seeing her mother, who had a very tender hold of her wayward heart.

Miss Dale she affected not to see at first, and greeted her at last with wonderful coolness. Vashti was very indignant at Miss Dale, for two reasons—one was her suffering her to go from home with her "outre" wardrobe, and another that she had never written her once while away.

Miss Dale, however, did not seem at all put out by Vashti's cool airs. On the contrary, she was marvelously smiling, and rode over all this reserve and distance in a manner peculiar to her when it did not suit her to notice anything of the kind.

"Have you seen your aunt?" asked Mrs. Everleigh.

Vashti made the old, impatient movement at mention of her aunt, and said :

"No, indeed, I have but just come ; and I told Elise, who let me in, nor to tell anybody I had come."

"Nora, go right up to your aunt's room, and tell her Vashti is here."

Vashti shrugged her shoulders, but said nothing ; and Nora, avoiding her aunt as she always did of late, asked :

"Hadn't I better send a servant, mamma?"

"No, certainly not ; Margery would not like to hear such news from a servant."

"Very well, I will go," Nora said, leaving the room.

Margery Gresham, sitting alone in her room, was roused from her austere meditations by the entrance of the child, breathless, a scared look in her brown eyes.

"What ails you, child?" she exclaimed, with her usual abruptness.

"I—I thought I heard something," stammered Nora, clinging involuntarily to her aunt.

"Let go my dress ; positively you are trembling. What has happened, I should like to know?"

"I heard something ; I did, Aunt Margery."

"You heard something? Well, what was it? You are growing nervous, Nora."

"Oh ! Aunt Margery, go out and see what it was, if you don't believe me. It was on the back stairway, close by the door of the Hermitage."

Margery's face turned ghastly white within the instant.

"Whatever possessed you to come by the back stairway?" she cried, as she seized the lamp and hurried from the room.

Led by some irresistible fascination, Nora followed her a few steps from the door.

A little distance off Miss Margery met Philip.

"What madness is this?" she cried, with an appalled voice.

He answered her in a low tone; she, clutching his arm, and both hurrying along the corridor. In another instant a sound cleft the darkness, whether of earth or air Nora stopped not to think, but darted into her aunt's room, waiting there with almost intolerable terror till her return. She came in soon, looking flurried, but laughing scornfully, as she said:

"What a simpleton you are, Nora! I didn't know but some terrible creature had got into the house; but there's nothing there. Don't come the back stairway again; it is old and rickety, and you might get hurt——"

"What was that cry I heard, Aunt Margery, after you went out? It wasn't you?"

"What! Oh, yes; I heard it, too; perhaps it was the wind. Don't be so ridiculously nervous, Lenore. Everleigh is not haunted; there is no such thing. Miss Dale has been telling you ghost stories, hasn't she?"

The child shook her head.

"Some of the servants, then?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well, I am glad of it; don't listen when they get to telling such things. You'll get so fanciful you'll see all sorts of sights if you do. What did you think you heard on the back stairway?"

"I—I thought I heard something breathe. Perhaps it was Bute, Aunt Margery; perhaps he has come back. I think I did hear something."

"Nonsense!" Miss Margery said, with another derisive laugh, but with something like a shudder. "It is likely

you did hear something, but nothing more than the wind and the rickety old staircase might be accountable for."

Nora looked somewhat relieved, and, suddenly remembering her errand. said :

"Aunt Margery, Vashti has come home ; I was coming to tell you."

Miss Gresham started.

"When did she come?"

"A little while ago."

"Where is she?"

"In mamma's room. Won't you come down and see her?"

"Not to-night. I fancy she is not particularly anxious to see me. What has she come home for?"

Nora colored and was silent. She did not like to repeat what her sister had said.

"Ah, well, it is no matter ; I shall find out in time. I could guess pretty nearly now."

"I wish, Aunt Margery, you would hold the light for me as far as the great hall. I did not bring a lamp, I was in such a hurry to tell you."

"What ! still afraid? I will go with you all the way," said Miss Margery, with unusual heartiness for her.

At the door of Mrs. Everleigh's room Miss Margery repented of her determination not to see Vashti that night, and went in.

Vashti shook hands with her aunt, but did not offer to kiss her—an omission that vexed Mrs. Everleigh not a little. By way of covering her annoyance, she said, smiling feebly :

"Isn't it a pleasant surprise, Margery?"

"Very," said Margery, dryly ; and Vashti understood by

her tone that she meant it was no surprise at all—no more than she had expected.

"We shall have Frank coming back before long, perhaps—who knows?" said Mrs. Everleigh.

"I think it is likely. Did you leave Mrs. Gordon well, Vashti?"

"I did. I have a letter for you from her in my trunk. Will you have it to-night, or wait till morning? I have not unpacked yet."

"In the morning will do as well as any time. I presume it is newsy, and might keep me awake if I had it to-night."

Vashti answered, "Very well," with assumed indifference, and Miss Gresham said good-night very soon, and went away. She put her head in at the door again after she had shut it, saying, with one of her grim smiles :

"Take good care of that letter, Vashti. Don't be tempted to burn it."

"I am tempted to burn it," said Vashti, with a stamp of her passionate foot. "She knows what is in it well enough. I wish to goodness I had never told her anything about it."

On the morrow, however, Miss Gresham got her letter, and, contrary to Vashti's expectation, did not once allude to its contents to her. She had expected some sarcastic exulting on her aunt's part at the fulfillment of her prophecy, but it was quite the reverse. Miss Gresham even seemed a little tender toward her, and proposed the same day to procure a competent teacher to come into the house and attend to both hers and Nora's education. Vashti gave only a haughty and cool assent to the proposal. She had not yet forgiven that disagreeable prophecy. But nothing daunted, Miss Gresham wrote immediately to New

Haven, where she had acquaintances, to inquire for a suitable person—a gentleman, if possible. At the same time she ordered a very elegant piano, for those days.

CHAPTER XX.

A TUTOR AT EVERLEIGH.

In process of time came a letter to Miss Margery, saying that the very person she wanted stood ready to obey her summons—a Mr. Dascomb, a fine musician, he was said to be, as well as an accomplished scholar. Miss Gresham wrote immediately to offer him the situation, appointing an early day for him to enter upon his duties, and announced the progress of affairs in due time to the family.

Miss Dale was in high feather. She had fawned over the poor infatuated Vashti, till she had brought matters to their old footing between them. And now she succeeded in installing herself in that long-coveted place, as Mrs. Everleigh's companion—this last greatly to Elise's dissatisfaction, who loved her mistress, and considered herself peculiarly her attendant.

Finally came Mr. Dascomb, a young man, to Miss Margery's dismay. She had pictured to herself a man after the style of a tutor she had once had—plain, awkward, and rather old. However, she recollected in time that all tutors could not be made from the same model, and forgave the man for being good-looking and young.

Mr. Dascomb had a rather striking appearance generally. He was graceful and insinuating in his manners, a little pretentious, and a little foppish. He had raven-black

hair and whiskers, a rather low, square forehead, heavy black eyebrows and lashes, and blue eyes.

Miss Gresham met him with considerable *empressement*, and herself made him acquainted with the various members of the family—with Mrs. Everleigh first, and then Nora and Vashti were sent for. Vashti chose to be on her dignity with Mr. Dascomb, whom she was determined to consider only as a pet of Aunt Margery's, and her reception of him was so very distant that a frown rose to Miss Gresham's face. The gentleman himself suffered his blue eyes to rest an instant longer on her countenance than was necessary. It was all the sign he gave of having noticed what amounted almost to rudeness on Vashti's part.

Nora was more affable, endeavoring by her cordiality to atone in some degree for her sister's marked coolness. Miss Dale came in presently, and she started as her eyes fell on the tutor, smothering some exclamation, as his cool, unmoved glance met her.

"Miss Dale, Mr. Dascomb," said Mrs. Everleigh's gentle voice.

He bowed, saying, with rather marked emphasis:

"I am happy to make your acquaintance, Miss—Miss Hale, I believe you said, madam?"

"Dale, sir," corrected Mrs. Everleigh.

"Ah, yes, Miss Dale."

He bowed again, never suffering his eyes to stray from that lady, who still stood in the open door, changing from red to white, and white to red, in a most unaccountable manner.

"Come in and shut the door, if you please, Miss Dale," said Margery Gresham, dryly. "It is not like you to be so bashful. What ails you?"

Miss Dale came into the room, pale and discomposed.

"Suffer me, madam," said Mr. Dascomb, with obsequious politeness, offering his hand, and leading Miss Dale to a seat. He gave her a fiery glance as he loosed her hand, whispering, as he bowed very low to her, "Don't be a fool, Hetty Dale."

"Miss Dale must be ill," he added in an audible voice, turning from her to Miss Gresham.

Miss Dale sat a moment, looking like one stunned, and then rising, went hastily from the room without a word, while Mr. Dascomb, pulling fiercely at his black whiskers, looked round the room at its amazed inmates.

"Very singular, indeed," said Miss Margery Gresham, with her sharp eyes on Mr. Dascomb. "I never suspected Miss Dale of any tendency to hysterics. Perhaps you and Miss Dale have met before, sir?"

"Never to my knowledge," he answered.

He looked about him for a seat, took one near Mrs. Everleigh, with whom he skillfully opened and kept up a conversation. He had, evidently, from the tone of his remarks, traveled much, and had visited places that Mrs. Everleigh had not seen since her honeymoon, when, in company with her husband, she had made a wedding-trip to Europe. He knew, by reputation, many of her old acquaintances, and brought her news of them, to her great delight.

As Mr. Dascomb passed from Mrs. Everleigh's room, after taking his leave, he stumbled right upon Miss Dale. She was standing there alone in the dim passage, waiting for him; and seizing hold of him as he came near, she cried:

"Is it you, Percy—is it—can it be?"

"Hush, hush; don't talk so loud."

"Come into my room, then, and tell me what all this means."

"Into your room—where are your wits, Hetty? A pretty mess it would be to have that old Gorgon catch me there."

"Come into the sitting-room, then—there is certainly no harm in that."

He followed her, looking anything but pleased, and said, as he glanced round the room:

"Be quick, now, with whatever you've got to say, and, if anybody comes, I would thank you to slip out of the other door before they get in."

"What do you mean talking this way, Percy Dascomb?" she asked, with bitter anger. "What is all this privacy for? What am I, and what are you, that there is need for such a juggling performance as this? Did you pretend you were dead to get rid of me? Do you think you can stave me off now? You didn't expect to find me here I'll be bound; you wouldn't have come, if you had. What do you mean, Percy Dascomb—tell me, will you?"

"Softly, Het, don't talk so loud. It was no fault of mine that you heard I was dead. I have been traveling in Europe, living on my wits, and educating myself for a tutor in a gentleman's family."

He laughed scornfully as he said the last words, and she said in bitter incredulity:

"You a tutor!"

"Ay, Mistress Het—a tutor for the nonce. I've qualified myself; and hark you, ma'am, it is my pleasure that you and I conduct ourselves to each other as though we had never met before. Smooth over that performance of yours a while ago—pretend that you were ill, or anything you

like, but don't dare to bring my name in. You came near losing me my place with your confounded nonsense."

"Ah, Percy! How could I help it? The wonder is that I did not do worse—to see you standing there alive, when I had thought, for so long, that you were dead."

"Well, well, I don't blame you; but don't let's have anything more of that kind. There, somebody is coming. Go—go!"

He opened an opposite door for her himself. She stood within it, holding it so that he could not shut it.

"You haven't said a kind word to me, Percy?" she said, reproachfully.

"Bother! Will you go?"

"Not while you talk so to me," she answered, sullenly. "I am not your dog, Percy. You will find you can't control me by fear."

"Well, then, will this do?"

He threw one arm over her neck, kissed her on each cheek, saying:

"I've a plan to make you and me rich, Hetty; trust me and obey me. If you won't do it for fear, do it for love—there."

She suffered him to put her through the door, and close it, but she did not look pleased or satisfied.

No one came to the sitting-room for a long time; Mr. Percy Dascomb had it all to himself, and he sat before the fire, basking his handsome self in the cheerful glow, complacently smoothing his ruffled whiskers, and possibly maturing his plans.

The piano came in the course of the next day. Mrs. Everleigh, leaning on Miss Dale, and with Nora on the other side, came out from her room like a pleased child, to

see it unpacked. Vashti stood proudly aloof, pretending indifference, and would not go near it.

However, when it was set up, and Mr. Dascomb ran his effeminate-looking fingers over it, she could not resist the alluring tones, and with her usual impulsiveness, went directly into the room and up to the side of the piano. The musician's heavy eyebrows arched themselves expressively at this demonstration, and as he played, passing lightly from one theme to another in rapid succession, he watched her furtively.

She was fairly conquered of her ill-humor before he was nearly through playing, and she thanked him with a glowing face when he had finished, as though he had done her a personal favor.

"I want to hear you play, Vashti," said Mrs. Everleigh.

She sat down without an instant't hesitation, but so embarrassed and constrained at first that she could not play at all. She succeeded, however, in redeeming herself soon.

CHAPTER XXI.

RECONCILED.

Contrary to Miss Gresham's avowed expectations, Francis Roscoe Everleigh continued at New Haven, writing once in a while, but never offering to come home, even for a visit, till the midsummer vacation. She heard of him and his "goings on" through a friend, who was kind enough to undertake to keep her posted regarding the boy. "A fine smart fellow," this friend called him, "rather too

fond of a tussle, and caring rather more for a nice bit of mischief than for his tasks."

He came home at midsummer, taller by some inches, slender as a forest sapling, a gay, dashing, beautiful boy, but impatient of the least restraint, uncurbed as a wild colt, inclined to consider himself the representative of his family, and to put on airs accordingly. He tormented Vashti, tyrannized over Nora, played tricks on Mr. Percy Dascomb, and managed to give Aunt Margery a piece of his mind on several occasions. The whole house was riot and confusion while he staid; and yet, strange to tell, everybody was sorry when he had gone.

In the fall Leon Brownlee came again for a few days, getting but a cool welcome from Margery Gresham, but bringing cheer to Nora, setting her straight on a good many knotty points, and getting the heartache himself as he saw how thin, and changed, and toil-worn the child had grown.

The evening before he left he followed Miss Gresham to her own room, and forced her to hold converse with him by the sheer persistency of his determination. In brief and pointed language he told her that she was all wrong in her system of repression and reserve; that she was killing Nora Everleigh by taking all sunshine away from her.

"She wants companionship and kindness, Margery. You are stunting her, morally and physically. Do you think a child like that has no sympathies, no feeling? Give her agreeable occupation—not study merely, but something that will occupy her heart and hands as well as her mind."

"What ails the child, Leon?" said Margery, touched, in spite of her resentment toward him, by this unexpected

appeal. "She used to go about singing all day, and romping with that great dog. Bute, you know, has been gone several months from home. Can it be she misses him so much?"

Miss Margery had some twinges of conscience in this quarter. The last time the dog had been seen she had driven him fiercely out of the great hall—had even beaten him and fought him away.

"Margery, can it be possible you do not *know* what has so changed that poor little Lenore? What could it be but one thing?"

"She got a fright here one night when she was coming up to my room," said Margery, turning a shade paler; "was it that?"

"No, no, no, Margery. Margery, is it possible that you do not know that she heard every word of that ill-omened warning you gave me once?"

Margery Gresham started from her seat nearly beside herself with amazement and dismay.

"Why did you never tell me, Leonidas?" she cried out, vehemently.

"You will recollect that you were, and have been, very unapproachable to me for some time. Besides, I never thought but that she would herself tell you."

"If I had known—if I had only known, I would never have said to that child, Leonidas, words I never should have said, if I had only known this—words that must have been torture to her. Why *didn't* she tell me what she had heard?"

"It is your own fault, Margery. I must speak plainly, cousin, if I speak at all. It is your own fault. She is desperately afraid of you; she has never had any reason to be otherwise. She was too afraid of you to speak."

"I will try and make it different hereafter. I mean well, Leon. I would give every joint of mine freely to the rack, if by so doing I could save those children from their father's fate."

"I haven't much faith in your system, Margery. Can you see that it has availed anything so far? Almost anybody seems to have more influence over Vashti than you. She seems perfectly carried away with this tutor you have got. I don't like that man, Margery."

"Tush! he's well enough, for all I have ever seen. There's no harm in Vashti's liking him. If she wasn't suited she'd be off to school in spite of me. I prefer to have her under my eye all the time"

"Which you fancy you have now, I suppose; but let me tell you, Margery, you are a great deal easier deceived than anybody I know, if one only knows how to take you; and if you don't look out sharp you'll find mischief going on right under your eyes."

"What do you mean, Leon?"

"That if you could get at this Dascomb's heart, you'd find 'villain' traced very legibly thereon. I wish you'd never seen him."

"Now, you are ridiculous, Leon. He brought the very best recommendations."

"Well, well, we will see; but I'd advise you to keep him under your eye, as well as Vashti."

In the morning Leon went away.

To Nora this parting seemed infinitely harder than the other. He was a stay and support to her while he staid, but now he was gone, and she went disconsolately about, or moped in some dark corner, thankful if nobody noticed her.

Often Margery Gresham passed her, lingering as she went

by, feverishly anxious to approach her tenderly,. but doubtful how to do it.

Later in the day Nora was standing in the door of the great hall, looking weary and listless, when what should she see but that dear, long-lost Bute, trotting up the road to the house. He looked miserable and forlorn enough, his silken ears drooping, his ebon hide muddy and travel-stained, his red tongue hanging from his fiery jaws and dripping froth.

With an exclamation of joy, Nora almost threw herself upon him, crying:

"Ah, Bute, dear Bute!"

The dog shook her off as though she had been a feather, and flinging upward his foaming jaws, snapped his teeth upon her bare, round arm, and trotted on, just as Philip, following close behind with his gun, called out too late:

"Don't touch him, Miss Nora—he's mad!"

"Great Heaven!" said a voice from the doorway, and in another instant Margery Gresham had the horrified child on her lap, as she sat down on the step, one arm holding her tightly to her, and with the other hand held the wounded arm pressed frantically to her lips.

Philip dropped his gun and stopped, but four or five other men rushed by in pursuit of the dog.

The sound of shots was heard presently, and very soon two of the men came back. Philip spoke with them, and one started immediately for the stables, which he seemed scarcely to have entered, before he was out again, and on horseback, riding as if for life down the avenue.

"I have sent for Dr. Gracie, Miss Margery. Is there anything else I can do?"

She shook her head, removing her lips only long enough to rinse her mouth with some water he brought her. She

was pale as death, and Nora lay quite motionless in her arms, her brown eyes going slowly from one to another of the group that had by this time gathered, and resting longest on her aunt's white face—the face she had so feared. The expression of her gaze was beyond words. Once Margery raised her eyes, and met that look with one of as intense meaning. In that instant, each knew that no after-bitterness or discord could come between the hearts of the stern, proud woman, and the little child.

They were still sitting there on the steps, Margery with her frantic lips still pressed to the wound, when Dr. Gracie came. He was a tender-hearted man, and Nora Everleigh was one of his pets. He dashed his hand suspiciously across his eyes, as he knelt by the pair, and proceeded to examine the wounded arm.

"By all that's good, Margery," he said, as he got up, "I think you have done this business better than I could, if I cauterized it a thousand times."

Margery Gresham was not given to tears over much, but as Nora, with an impulsive movement, put both arms about her neck, and laid her cheek to hers, she suffered her head to droop upon the child's shoulder with a sound very like a sob.

They got up and went in presently, Nora supported by her aunt. She was taken to Miss Margery's room, whither the doctor followed to bleed her, which he considered only a harmless precaution against any injurious effect. He left also a "wash" for the wound, and one for Miss Gresham's mouth, assuring them, however, that there was not the least danger to be apprehended, in the face of such immediate and energetic treatment.

Nora remained with her aunt through that day and night, nursed as carefully as though she had been really very ill,

and the expression of her sweet, thoughtful face, was reflected like sunshine from Miss Margery's.

Henceforth, these two had no real misunderstanding. All that Margery Gresham asked was confidence and trust, and that Nora gave now freely. Unlike as the two were, there was a bond of sympathy between them—a common love."

CHAPTER XXII.

CHANGES.

Vashti apparently was progressing wonderfully, and her educational facilities seemed of the best. Music, especially, she devoted a great portion of her time to, seeming passionately engrossed by it.

Nora made a less showy, but really more thorough advancement, both of heart and head. An expression grew daily into her thoughtful face—so peaceful that it rested one's eyes to look at her. She was learning how to cease from struggling—to give all her pain, her doubt, and despair into the All Father's better hands, and "walk by faith."

Frank came home at the Christmas holidays with his peculiar traits intensified, and went away leaving the same impression as before. Midsummer brought him again, wild and untamable as ever.

This autumn, though Leon had purposed to visit Everleigh, he did not come. His father, while in England on business, was taken suddenly alarmingly ill, and his son was sent for in all possible haste. The father, though living when the son reached him, was quite unable to attend

to business, and Leon took his place in the matter that had brought him there.

Eventually Mr. Brownlee returned home—so shattered in health, however, that the son took upon himself the whole business charge—a charge which involved the necessity of his remaining in England for an indefinite length of time.

At first it was thought he would be home in six months, possibly; but six years went by before he touched the American shore again.

Four years at Everleigh had brought about considerable changes. It was a cool October evening again. In the sitting-room, Vashti Everleigh, matured to the proud and queenly developments her childhood had promised, stood at one side of the ample fire-lit hearth, listening, with impatient look, word, and gesture, to Miss Margery Gresham. Miss Margery had grown sterner and more stately.

Vashti looked willful and spoiled—a spoiled beauty. Her face was the purest oval, with her hair folded in shining bands against it, her form slender, but well rounded, and her movements graceful. She wore a deep shade of crimson, with garnet ornaments upon her neck and arms, that caught flashes of fire-light as she turned impatiently from Miss Gresham, and walked two or three times across the room.

"I am eighteen this day," she said, as she walked. "I would never have waited till now to announce this my determination, for I scorn anything like concealment; but Percy insisted that I should wait, and I obeyed him, as I expect to obey my husband."

"Very conjugal you'll be, no doubt," said Margery, in her sarcastic way; "but you will never marry Percy Dascomb—never."

"Who will hinder me?" said Vashti, with a flash of her superb eyes.

"I will."

"You are powerless to do it."

"You will see;" and, after a pause: "But I don't want to use my power, Vashti; I want to see you yield to reason, and not insist upon marrying a man every way your inferior."

"Don't tell me that, Miss Gresham; your acquaintance with Mr. Dascomb dates from the same day with mine."

"What of that? Is it not possible that I may have observed contemptible shades in his character which have been carefully concealed from you?"

"There are no such shades; I will not be set up against him."

"Vashti Everleigh, this fellow is not acting honestly by you, or else he is acting dishonestly by some one else."

"Insinuations are beneath my notice," answered Vashti, haughtily.

"You can have something broader, if you choose. Send for Miss Dale, and ask her what relation he bears to her."

Vashti's face was redder than her dress, as she answered, passionately:

"Percy is nothing to Miss Dale. I know better. She has known of our engagement all along. She has been a true friend to us, to me—ever since she has been in the house. You were always trying to lower her in my estimation. But this is beyond endurance."

Miss Gresham looked at the girl in astonishment.

"If Miss Dale has known of this affair long," she said, "she must be a most consummate hypocrite. When my

suspicions were first aroused on the subject, she assured me, that there was nothing of the kind."

"Of course, she had no right to tell what had been confided to her in strict secrecy."

"She had no right to lie to me, Vashti Everleigh."

"I am no hypocrite, Aunt Margery," said Vashti, with a flush of shame. "I know nothing of what Miss Dale said to you. If I had known of your questioning her, I should have suffered her to tell the truth. I would rather she had told the truth; but she only deceived you, through excess of friendship for me."

"Deceived! Call things by their names. Miss Dale lied to me; and if I am not greatly mistaken, she has lied to you."

"I don't believe it, and I think you use very hard language."

"Well, well, send for Miss Dale. I should like to ask her a question or two in your presence—stay, I will go for her myself."

As Miss Gresham left the room by one door, Mr. Dascomb came in by the other, sauntering in indolent nonchalance up to the fire, not much changed from what he was when we last saw him, with his black hair and his black whiskers sleek and shining, and his white teeth showing between his complacent lips. He sat down, glancing over the elegant appointments of the room, with an "I am monarch of all I survey" air, and then lifting Vashti's hand as he sat near her, began to toy with the rings on her slender fingers. She drew it away from him almost immediately; something in his familiar bearing jarred with her present mood. He was too indolent and careless, too assured to notice it, and sat with his effeminate hands clasped be-

fore him, gazing idly in the fire, ruminating, it is likely, upon his prospect of marrying an heiress.

Presently Vashti said, with something of impatience, perhaps, at his silence and indifference :

"Percy, Aunt Margery says you are not acting honestly by me. She says there is something between you and Miss Dale."

She had meant to speak lightly, but, unconsciously, she spoke with angry emphasis.

All the red went out of the gentleman's handsome cheeks, as suddenly as though an extinguisher had been abruptly slid upon his flaming hopes, and he grew white to the very roots of his whiskers. After an instant's vain effort to recover himself, he rose, kicked his chair out of the way savagely, wishing, no doubt, that the chair was Miss Gresham, and turned his back upon Vashti and the fire.

"Gentlemanly, upon my word," said Vashti, in angry astonishment.

He bit his lip, pulling fiercely at his whiskers. He really did not know what to say ; how much did Margery Gresham know, and how came she to know it? However, he blundered out at last, without looking at Vashti :

"You don't expect me to hear that my betrothed wife listens to such insinuations regarding me, and sit under it like a statue ?"

His tone and his words were unfortunate—the very ones to strike fire on Vashti's inflammable spirit.

"I expect gentlemanly behavior from you always !" she answered, haughtily.

She was not used to have him speak to her with that tone and manner. His bearing was usually obsequious and courtly in the extreme.

He saw his mistake, through the fog of his dismay and

perplexity, and turning suddenly, seized both her hands, covering them with kisses, and saying :

"Forgive me ; I cannot live under your displeasure ; I cannot bear to be doubted."

"I have not doubted you, Percy," she answered, more kindly. "I shall, if you talk and behave as you did just now."

"I was wrong, but I was so excited at the mere thought of your suspecting me, that I did not at all know what I was about," he answered, lifting his blue, heavy-lashed eyes to the face of the imperious beauty, with a wonderfully contrite expression.

She smiled her rare smile at him, in token of forgiveness, and he said :

"What did your aunt mean by saying I was not acting honestly by you?"

"Here she comes to answer for herself," Vashti replied, as Miss Gresham entered the room, followed by Miss Dale, looking considerably nonplussed.

Mr. Dascomb could not for his life conceal his uneasiness, and he gave the ex-governess a fiery glance, that did not at all contribute to her self-possession. She answered him with a sullen look, and sat down in great apparent discomposure. Miss Gresham opened her eyes, as she saw him, and took no further notice of him.

"I wish you would tell Miss Everleigh here, what is the exact relation you bear to Mr. Percy Dascomb," she said to Miss Dale, confronting that lady, tall, stern, and grim ; "and you will please tell the truth this time."

Miss Dale was struck with the same perplexed thought that had met Mr. Dascomb—how much did Miss Gresham know? Bad and contemptible as she was, however, she was shrewder than Mr. Percy, and was not the craven-

hearted being he threatened every instant to prove himself, by succombing to his fears, and giving up the ground. If Miss Gresham knew all there was to know, there was nothing to be gained by confession, she reasoned.

"The relation I bear to Mr. Dascomb?" she said, looking at Miss Gresham with an air of innocent perplexity. "He is no relation of mine, Miss Margery."

Miss Margery frowned.

"Don't equivocate, Miss Dale," she said. "I happen to have eyes, and know how to use them. I was accidentally a witness of a portion of your interview with Mr. Dascomb the very day of his arrival, four years ago. I was in the ante-room there when you came through from this room. I heard nothing, but I saw what convinced me that the gentleman here told me a falsehood when he denied ever seeing you before. However, I let that pass, concluding that it was some love affair that was none of my business, and whenever I was likely to come upon a tender passage between you two I looked the other way. Latterly becoming suspicious of his peculiar bearing toward Vashti, I kept my eye on you again. I might have heard a great deal, but I only chose to see enough to convince me that he could have no designs upon Miss Everleigh. To-day, however, I am informed that an engagement of marriage has been entered into between them, and that you have been the *confidante* of this preposterous proceeding. Now then, Miss Dale, will you be kind enough to tell Miss Everleigh how it happens that the man she has promised to marry makes such very affectionate demonstrations to other people, yourself for instance?"

Dascomb had by this time considerably recovered his assurauce. If that was all Miss Margery knew there was nothing to fear. He was well aware of the peculiar feeling

which existed between Miss Gresham and Vashti—a feeling which he, as well as Miss Dale, has fostered to the best of his ability.

Approaching Miss Margery with a most graceful and deliberate manner, he said :

"With all due respect to you, Miss Gresham, as an adopted relative of my future wife, I must beg leave to tell you that somehow you are laboring under a mistake. Miss Dale is a lady I have a very high esteem for—very ; but as to demonstrations of affection—pardon me—you are certainly misinformed."

Miss Margery's face, under this elaborate peroration, wore an expression of most ludicrous amazement. The impudence of the man seemed at first utterly beyond her comprehension.

"Misinformed!" she managed to blurt out. "How misinformed, sir? Do you mean that I cannot trust the evidence of my own eyes?"

"I mean nothing offensive, indeed, madam, but you know one couldn't remain silent under such insinuations as that, even from a lady.

"Insinuations!" she cried, finding vehement voice at last. "There are no insinuations about it. It is a plain matter of fact. I have seen you myself caress that woman there—Miss Dale—with your arm around her and your lips upon her cheek. Insinuations indeed, sir! I know very well what I am saying, and you to talk of taking an Everleigh to wife! Vashti, Vashti, send this man off! He taints the very air with his breath."

Vashti started as though some one had struck her. She had gradually, as if fascinated, drawn near the group. She put her hand on Dascomb's arm. Pressing the hand in both his, he led her to a seat, whispering :

"Trust me, my love; you will never fall into so base a plot against our happiness."

To Miss Gresham he said. with an air of injured candor:

"I forgive you, madam, your unjust imputations. Without giving a lady the lie, which I am incapable of doing, I leave it to my betrothed wife whether or no appearances are not entirely opposed to your statement. Is it likely that a lady of Miss Dale's qualities of person, mind, and heart would submit to such trifling as you speak of, or, having done so, could sit unmoved and hear me express my passionate devotion to another?"

"She is not unmoved. See there!"

Indeed Miss Dale had risen from her seat with a terribly agitated face. Dascomb's cold blue eye was on her in an instant. She faltered as he looked at her, or seemed to falter in some determination.

"My dear madam," he said, bowing before her with the profoundest respect, "do not suffer this most ridiculous and unfounded charge to afflict you so. Would that Percy Dascomb had never crossed this threshold, since his coming seems to have been productive of a scene like this."

"Yes, better dead a thousand times!" burst like the explosion of a bomb from Miss Dale's lips, as she turned away and walked nervously to the door.

With a movement resembling the swift and stealthy tread of a tiger, he was at her side in an instant. Holding her hand in his as in a vise, he led her with an appearance of obsequious courtesy back, and to Vashti, saying gently, but with his steely eye on her:

"It is only just that you should have an opportunity of vindicating yourself to this lady—of saying, as I say, that there has been neither foundation, nor shadow of founda-

tion, for any one thinking that there is ought between us save a friendly acquaintance."

"I will not condescend to that," she cried. "My humiliation is more than I can bear."

She wrenched her hand from him, and fled from the room.

He did not even look at her.

"Are you satisfied?" he said, with a triumphant glance in his deluding eyes, as he bent before Vashti. "Is it enough that your true friend has been so bitterly humiliated? Shall I condescend to notice more this ridiculous charge against me?"

Vashti was silent.

Miss Gresham had not spoken for many minutes. With an expression of angry but determined indifference, she was slowly pacing the floor. Now however, she approached Vashti, and said, sternly:

"Choose between him and me—choose!"

He held his open hands supplicating before her. She laid her cold and trembling fingers upon his outstretched palms, lifted her haughty eyes to Margery Gresham's face, and said:

"I choose—him!"

Stung to the heart, Margery only raised her hands before her agitated face with a gesture of warning, and left the room.

Arrived at her own chamber, she summoned Philip. He was with her an hour or more.

Early in the morning, before any one else was astir, he was off, whither no one knew. He was absent a week, and when he returned brought letters to Miss Dale from her friends in Newbury, whither he had been, as he scrupled not to tell, making inquiries regarding the lady.

He learned some facts bearing immediately upon the question under consideration—namely, that years before, when Miss Hetty Dale was a blooming maid of sixteen, she had possessed a lover answering to the description of Percy Dascomb, save that he was only a stripling then, and bearing the same name. This lover had disappeared very suddenly, and he was at last given up as dead. Lately, however, it had been reported that one and another had occasionally seen a man resembling this Percy wonderfully. People were inclined to believe that he was living.

All this being laid before Vashti, did not seem to daunt her in the least. She had put her trust in Percy Dascomb, and she was willfully, passionately determined to trust him to the end.

It was impossible for him to remaim at Everleigh after that scene with Miss Margery. Even he had not the audacity to do that, when Miss Margery laid the alternative before her sister, Mrs. Everleigh, to banish him or she would go.

Vashti rejected indignantly his proposal for a secret marriage. She had a right to marry when and whom she chose, and no need to skulk trom the face of friend or foe to do it, she declared. Neither would she be married in haste, as though she were afraid something might happen to break the match. Nothing—nobody could do that; nothing and nobody should do it. She would give everybody deliberate notice that she was to marry Percy Dascomb on such a day ; and, in spite of them all, she would do it. He had to submit. She herself appointed the first of June as her bridal day, and no amount of protestation or persuasion even from him, could induce her to change it.

He went away inwardly vowing to take revenge for waiting when he had once secured her.

He came stealing back again late at night to hold an interview with his old love, Hetty Dale, because she had thrust a note into his hand at parting, threatening to tell all if he did not come.

He was cross and snarling, and Miss Dale, with a shawl over her head, was shivering with cold, and hot with anger, reproach, and bitter invective.

"You are fooling me, Percy; you are making a mere tool of me; and, when you have got that scornful beauty for your wife, you will kick me out of your way; but I won't be disposed of in that manner. I tell you I won't. I can make you or break you now; and if you don't give over mocking me in this way, and jeering at the heart that never knew anything else but to throb for you, I'll burst the whole abominable scheme into as many fragments as there are leaves between this and the house."

"But, Hetty——" he began, nervously.

"But me no buts. You think I can endure anything—everything; but I can't, and I won't. Make your peace with me, Percy Dascomb, or take the consequence."

"I will make no peace with you, Hetty Dale. Do your worst. It can't be much worse than these cursed months of waiting will be, and I am tired of your humors."

"There is a limit to forbearance, Percy. Do you really dare me to the extent your words indicate?"

"You expect to share in the profits, don't you? What is all this nonsense about, then?" he said, fiercely.

"The nonsense is this—that I won't submit to have you treat me in this manner any longer; I have endured enough."

"Zounds, Hetty, how cold it is! I'm off—wishing you

will be in better temper before we meet again," he said, with a sudden change from his former fierce tone to one of cool indifference.

He took two or three steps away, she speechless with consternation, and, then turning back, put his gloved hands lightly on her shoulders, and left a kiss on her lips. He was gone again in an instant, and, chilled to the heart, she went slowly up to the house, almost wishing that the earth would gap wide and swallow herself, Everleigh, and him.

He went tearing away through the grounds, dashing his hand with fierce loathing across the lips that had kissed her, and cursing the necessity that compelled him to buy her silence with caresses.

"She tells the truth," he muttered to himself, as he kicked the avenue gate open. "When I get that glorious Vashti and her portion counted out in the pure stuff, I shall cut Het decidedly, and this confounded country besides."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WORSE AND WORSE.

Miss Gresham made a great effort, and conquered her indignation sufficiently to try and treat Vashti exactly as formerly. It was quite impossible for them to meet, however, without something of bitterness on one side, and of defiance on the other.

Mrs. Everleigh was not accustomed to take a very decided position in anything. She was usually led and governed by the will of others. Her strong point, however, if

she had any, was her pride. She was herself of a proud old English stock, and, to her mind, the idea of an Everleigh marrying a tutor was connected with everlasting disgrace. With more spirit than had ever entered into any previous intercourse with her children, she announced her emphatic disapproval of the proposed match.

Alone with her mother, Vashti might have received this announcement with some degree of moderation in her displeasure; but Miss Margery happening to be present, she allowed herself to be so carried away by anger, as apparently to quite forget to whom she was talking, and to use language that she never thought of in after years without agonized pangs of self-reproach.

As for Mrs. Everleigh, she lifted her white face with a pitiful and shocked expression to Miss Gresham, saying:

"Tell her to leave the room, Margery."

Vashti waited no telling, but went out in sullen silence. Even then she would have craved forgiveness for her fault, if Miss Margery had not been present.

She burst in upon Nora, reading in the sitting-room, her features convulsed with passion, and her lips overflowing with torrents of bitterness.

Nora gathered something of the state of the case, enough to know that her sister had said something dreadful to their mother. She looked only less shocked than Mrs. Everleigh had done.

"Vashti! Oh, sister! how could you—how could you? Poor, sick mamma!"

"Haven't I said I was sorry?" Vashti answered, fiercely. "I couldn't have spoken so, if that evil-eyed Margery Gresham had not been present."

Nora was silent, only looking sadly at her sister with her clear brown eyes.

"That woman is my evil genius," Vashti continued. "She has cursed my whole life; she has never brought any good to our house. From the hour she entered Everleigh she has only done us evil, and that continually."

She was pacing the room excitedly, her dusky eyes shining luridly, and her cheeks on fire.

"I wish I knew what it was about papa—just what it was. I would tax her with it, as true as my name is Vashti."

"About papa?" Nora said, a little startled.

"About papa," Vashti answered, emphatically. "I suppose you know that there was some mystery attending papa's death. If you didn't before, you know it now."

Nora made no reply. It was Vashti's custom to speak harshly to her often nowadays, and her custom to receive such harshness frequently, with a burning face, but always with silence. She had not yet sufficient control of her own passionate tongue to trust it with words at such times.

"Papa did not die in the face of day, as other people do," Vashti continued. "I remember, and you must, how carefully we were kept from the room where he lay ill, how we never knew he was dying till Margery Gresham told us he was dead, how we were only suffered to see him once before they hurried him off to the grave. There was no funeral, no minister, only Doctor Gracie read the burial service over him, and they hustled him under the ground as though he had been a pauper."

With a face like death, Nora stood looking with appalled eyes from Vashti to the picture over the mantel-piece, and from that back to Vashti.

"I had thought," the elder sister said again, "that I would never tell you this. There are people who say that Margery Gresham knows more of papa's death than she chooses to tell. I believe it. She always looks as though

somebody had struck her whenever the subject comes up. She must have a guilty conscience, or she wouldn't believe that ridiculous story about the Hermitage being haunted. I know she pretends she doesn't believe it, but actions speak louder than words, and she never suffers one of us near to it, keeps it locked, and bolted, and barred as though it was a donjon keep, and looks like a ghost herself if anybody talks of entering the old shell. There, I believe she is coming now, and I would as soon see Medusa as her."

She left the room as she spoke, slamming the door after her, and leaving one more root of bitterness in Nora's heart.

At Christmas, when Frank Everleigh came home, looking singularly manly and handsome, and with quite as lordly an air as ever, he shocked everybody by giving utterance to some very round oaths, and the subject of Vashti's "entanglement," as he chose to call and consider it, with "that fellow."

It had never been his way to yield her a whit of deference as his elder, which she was by two years. As children they had quarreled furiously over the exactions of Vashti's imperious disposition. He chose to consider himself—being the only male representative of the family—as its head; and he swore that his sister should never so far disgrace herself and her blood as to marry this low, tutoring adventurer, with a language and manner so vehemently like his father, that Margery Gresham was for an instant almost frenzied with the horror which that resemblance inspired, and leaving Vashti with her dark face rigid and purple with passionate anger, she flew along the corridor to find Philip. Meeting Nora, she said, hoarsely:

"Go to the sitting-room, Nora, for Heaven's sake!"

And finding Philip just outside the great hall-door, she

seized hold of him and fairly dragged him thither also, crying :

"Oh, Philip, this mad blood of the Everleighs, what a curse it is!"

In the sitting-room, Vashti, with both hands, leaned heavily upon a table, trembling so that she could hardly stand, her white lips speechless with the storm that racked her.

Frank, with a face like a madman's, and orbs of fire, stood a few paces off, while Nora, with her pure eyes first on one and then on the other, drooped in the midst of this disgraceful scene, praying sadly :

"Oh, brother! oh, sister! it would kill mamma if she heard you."

Frank's wild face took a half sullen, half shamed expression as Philip came into the room. If there was a person at Everleigh for whom he held a deep veneration and respect it was this old man, who had grown gray in his faithful service of the family, just as his father's and his father's father's had done before him. He dropped into a chair, and with his elbows on his knees, leaned his face moodily upon his hands.

Presently Vashti left the room, followed by Nora; Margery Gresham was pacing the corridor, and looking inexpressibly relieved at Vashti's appearance. Philip and Frank sat silent some minutes, and then the former said, with a nervous, forced laugh :

"We're on the broad road to destruction, Philip. I suppose you indorse Aunt Margery on that point?"

"Oh, my dear Mister Frank, I can't bear to hear you talk so."

"Just tell me, Philip, will you—what it's all about—what's the mystery about Everleigh? How does it come

that all the country round knows more about us than we do ourselves? Ah, Philip, Philip, did you and Aunt Margery think we could grow up under the ghostly drapings of that old Hermitage, and never find out what a rare, wonderful heritage was ours? Why, man, this execrable inheritance has been thrown in my face a dozen times a week ever since I can remember. I have broken every other fellow's head at New Heaven for something of the sort. Philip Bryce, out with it. What in Heaven's name is the doom that hangs over these old barracks? Will you tell me, I say?"

He had risen, with a burst of fiery gesticulation, as he spoke, and waited, with a heaving chest, the old man's response.

Philip Bryce had risen, too, and with his clasped hands holding by the high old-fashioned mantel-piece, lifted his misty eyes to the portrait over it, dropping them with a wild misgiving to the young face so like—so like in its fierce eagerness of questioning, that his old and well-nigh broken heart seemed to die within him.

"Will you tell me, old man?" almost screamed Frank.

"Gold help me now; God help me!" said Margery Gresham to herself, as, unable to endure longer the echo of the scene in the sitting-room, she opened the door and came in, with slow, deliberate step.

"Aunt Margery, will you tell me? I shall go mad over the uncertainty of the doom that I know hangs over my race. This muffled, unknown dread, meets me at every turn. It is forever booming in my ear in the midst of the rush of every-day life, like the sound of a funeral bell at sea."

"Sit down, Francis Everleigh—calm yourself. I can

tell you nothing while your eyes glare upon me like a demon's."

"Miss Margery, oh, Miss Margery! Don't tell him, it will do no good."

"Peace, Philip; have I not said these Everleighs shall not go to destruction unwarned? I will tell him. It has been wickedly delayed too long now. It will not be in vain. Nora was warned—and with God's blessing, Nora will be saved."

Francis had sunk into his seat, seeming to retain it with difficulty, so great was his excitement. His face, pale as ashes, twitched convulsively and his lips writhed with impatience.

"Frank?" said Margery, in a voice so pitiful and tender that it did not sound like hers. "Frank—thy father's son—be still—this curse that haunts thy house, can only be averted by one whose will is iron. Be still—be still—I can never tell you while you look thus, Frank."

Her cold hand dropped upon his brow. He dashed it off as though it had been a viper.

"You are less than human to ask me to be calm, till you have told me what it is I dread, Aunt Margery. An unknown terror is a terrible thing."

"My poor Frank! it shall be unknown no longer. This is what, and all it is. A progenitor of the Everleigh family—a bold, bad, wicked man—a man of the most terrible and unbridled passions—a man who died a raving madman, left to his descendents the inheritance of his bad blood, his crimes, his passions. A vulgar tradition says, he cursed them in words fearful and appalling—cursed them with a curse of madness! Inheriting this vitiated blood, the Everleighs have been a race that has reveled in the recklessness of an unbridled indulgence of all their bad passions.

It is said that many of them have died madmen. I am told, however, that the old lord—Lord Roscoe Everleigh, who came to this country in its early settlement, and from whom you are directly descended, was a man loved as much as feared, which the Everleighs before him were not. This same tradition says, that in him a good and an evil spirit contended for mastery, but he died a madman. Since his time, the curse, whatever it was, has seemed to take at least a more mitigated form. You know that you Everleighs have tempers that are as consuming fire. This element in your compositions is a relic of that old, wicked curse. In every generation of your family in this country it has come to a deadly fruition. Your great-grandfather was a madman at forty-five. Your grandfather burst a blood-vessel in an ebullition of anger, having first caused the death of his own wife, by a blow given in the heat of passion. Your father's brother died in consequence of a willful persistency in a matter that he was warned would end fatally. Your father——"

She paused, sending a glance of lightning toward Philip, who stood with his face buried in his hands; over her features came that inexpressible change that always followed any allusion to Roscoe Everleigh.

"Well—my father!" said the young man.

"He gathered the same deadly fruit as the rest—it blasted his life; it has blasted your mother's once blooming existence; it has wrecked Philip. See there—an old man, with a breaking heart; see me, an old woman, before my time. The blow that struck him struck us all who loved him. Ah, woe is me!"

The agony concentrated in her last words was beyond description:

"Tell me, how did he die?"

"How? Francis, do you ask me that? What can I tell you that you do not know? Do you mock me, sir?"

"I have heard terrible hints, Aunt Margery. I must know. Did my father take his own life?"

"No."

"Is it the truth, Philip, that she tells?"

"Before Heaven, it is, sir," the old man lifted his head to say.

The young man's head drooped to his hand resting on his chairback. They went out presently, and Margery sent into him Nora, "for," she said, "you are fighting the good fight, Nora, and I believe you will come off conqueror."

When they came out an hour after—Frank and Nora—they had both been crying.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DREAD.

Francis Everleigh went back to New Haven to school. Winter settled its gray pall over the old brown-stone house; the oaks and the elms, the chestnuts and the maples, tossed their gaunt arms against the sky; and gloomy forebodings, sickness of heart, long, weary days, kept watch and ward at Everleigh.

Nora's was the one undimmed face that brightened the dark hours of that long, brooding winter. Vashti staid much in her own room, or drew fitful bursts of stormy music from the piano, to which she resorted often. She was gloomy, silent, and reserved. Mrs. Everleigh drooped

rather more than usual this winter. Margery Gresham began to stoop slightly as she walked. Miss Dale—well, she looked paler and thinner than any one had ever known her; but she was gay to extravagance—gay with a hilarity that nobody was pleased with. She seemed in a nervous tremor and excitement, laughing constantly like an actor in a farce, hovering about Mrs. Everleigh, and avoiding Vashti inexplicably. Her influence over the poor sick lady increased rather than diminished daily; but, alas, it seemed of late to one mind an influence rather of fear than love.

Nora, always hanging about watching for solitary moments when Miss Dale was absent from the room, that she might steal in for a kiss or a loving word, was shocked by being bidden by her mother to hurry away before Miss Dale got back—bidden with an accent and expression of terror as mysterious as sad.

As spring came—spring that always heretofore gladdened Everleigh—every one seemed to shrink dismayed and scared at its approach.

Vashti kept more than ever to her room; Miss Dale's levity grew more boisterous and ill-timed; and Margery, Margery Gresham, avoided everybody, falling into long fits of moody abstraction, sitting for hours with her stern face motionless, and her clasped hands upon her lap, or pacing the floor in a seemingly tireless march.

March, April, May.

The birds sang, the flowers blossomed, sunbeams chased shadows in the beautiful grounds round Everleigh, but within one shadow stalked that mocked the sunniest sunbeam that ever danced.

Nobody said "first of June," but everybody's heart was heavy with the thought of it.

It was the last week in May. Margery Gresham came suddenly upon a man sauntering carelessly along, his clasped hands behind him; an indolent, handsome, wicked-faced man, with an "I am monarch of all I survey" air.

His white teeth glanced like ivory between his sneering lips as, without seeming at all startled, he lifted his hat to her and passed on.

"She has not given up this mad plan, then," Margery murmured to herself, hurrying toward the house as though a demon traeked her steps. "I was a fool to think of it—a besotted fool to think anything could hinder an Everleigh."

Going straight to Mrs. Everleigh's room, she said to her sister:

"I have just seen Dascomb in the grounds. Possibly Vashti has not yet seen him. Send for her to read to you; it will at least give me time to think what I can do, and above all act as though you suspected nothing."

Vashti came at the summons after a little delay. Some expression in Miss Dale's eye enlightened her, or gave her a hint as to why she had been sent for. She glanced round the room with a heightened color, and an alarmed light in her eye that was not lost on Mrs. Everleigh.

She sat down, however, and read as Mrs. Everleigh requested, her face flushing and growing white by turns, and her voice, in spite of all her efforts, unsteady.

Presently she closed the book—it was growing dusk—and going to Mrs. Everleigh kissed her, saying:

"I do not feel very well to-day, mamma, so I will bid you good-night now."

"Don't leave me, Vashti," Mrs. Everleigh said, holding her close; "don't go; stay by me."

Vashti sat down again, looking greatly distressed, and struggling with some rising feeling, which filled her eyes with tears, that she stealthily wiped away, hoping that in the dimness of the room they had escaped observation.

After a little she rose again.

"I must really go, mamma; I feel very bad, indeed."

There was no doubt of this last being true; the hand and lip that touched Mrs. Everleigh's were burning hot. Something trembled on Mrs. Everleigh's tongue. She longed to say, "It will kill me if you marry that bad man, Vashti," but she was not sure that the girl knew of Dascomb's presence. She feared to rouse the passionate spirit that had wrung her heart so cruelly when they had last spoken on this subject; finally, it must be confessed, she feared to speak before Miss Dale, and she had great confidence in Margery Gresham's efforts for as peaceful an adjustment of the matter as possible, so, as Vashti said again, "Good-night, mamma," she only lifted her lips and her arms, held her an instant close—close—as though she feared she might never hold her thus again, and with a long, lingering look upon the face that tried to hide itself upon her shoulder, she let her go.

As Vashti closed the door, she got a glimpse of eyes so earnest, wistful, and yearning, that she went away to her room, with the tears drifting in blinding mists over her eyes. Her room that reminded her so painfully of her loving mother, whom she was hardening her heart to leave. Her trunk—not the big trunk she had taken to Laurel Hill, but a light affair that she could almost shoulder herself, stood there, packed and strapped down. Just within the closet at her side, were her bonnet, mantle, and a traveling dress.

She sat down on the trunk, crying bitterly. Presently she rose, and threw herself on the bed, but not to sleep.

She felt too dreary and excited for sleep, and her head ached till it seemed bursting with pain. She heard the various sounds about the house which indicated that the household was retiring to its rest. She heard Nora come to her room, and after a little, open the door into Vashti's. With a stealthy movement Vashti drew the snowy spread up over her, that Nora might not see that she was lying there without having undressed, and pretended to be asleep.

Nora stepped softly to the bed, stooped over and kissed her sister, and with a half sigh stole out again to her own bed, in which she was soon sleeping sweetly.

When all seemed to have grown perfectly quiet, Vashti rose, and groping her way to the closet before mentioned, proceeded slowly and with trembling fingers to disrobe herself, and assume the traveling-dress, bonnet, and mantle. Her gloves she slipped into her pocket, for she felt that she needed untrammeled fingers for the rest of her undertaking.

Opening her door noiselessly, she stepped out into the passage in slippered feet. Stopping every moment, she groped her way on to the hall. The great door was closed. She had no thought of opening it; but beyond, a few paces down a passage toward the kitchen, was a small side-door. This yielded to her touch silently. Leaving it open, she flew down the walk. From a thicket of shadows somebody stepped forth and clasped her in his arms.

Disengaging herself, she said under her breath.

"They watch so closely at the house that I have concluded to try it to-night. Later, I am afaid it would be impossible. It galls me to have to steal away in the night, but for mamma's sake I go in this way, and thus avoid the storm that a more open manner of procedure would entail

upon us. Excitement, you know, always makes mamma ill."

"My Peri!" he answered, "there has been a carriage waiting near the avenue gate, every night for more than a week."

"I must have the trunk; it is only a small affair, but it is indispensable. Can you go in with me and get it. The house is quite quiet, the doors all open or ajar between this and my room.

"For you, my queen, I could become a second Daniel in the den of lions," he said, following her in.

They reached the door of Vashti's room in safety; but, oh, unlucky contretemps! it was shut and resisted all efforts to open it!

This is Margery Gresham's work, depend upon it," whispered Vashti. "She is doubtless on our track. What shall we do? It would be too mortifying and ridiculous to be hindered now."

"And we won't be hindered, not for a hundred Margery Greshams. We will take this door; she is probably guarding the one we came in by. Give me your hand."

One of those bewildering side entrances spoken of in a description formerly given of Everleigh, gave them egress, and they reached the avenue gate by a slightly circuitous route. But from beside it stepped Margery Gresham, Philip, and Elise.

"You cannot pass here," said Margery, a little in advance of the others. "By your mother's orders, Vashti Everleigh, I bid you return to the house."

"I shall never do it," answered Vashti, clinging to her lover. "I will never enter those doors save as Percy Dascomb's wife, or worse."

"Your words are a prophecy, willful child, for it will

certainly be what you consider worse. As Percy Dascomb's wife, your mother bade me tell you, you should never darken her doors."

"Be it so," was the haughty answer. "Meanwhile, good people, let us pass, for our business is of great moment."

"I thought you considered yourself to have an inalienable right to marry when, where, and whom you choose. I thought you were one of those who would never skulk from the face of day," Margery said, with bitter sarcasm.

"Neither would I, only to save mamma from the scene your officiousness would force upon her if I married, as I certainly have a right to do, at home."

"Very filial you are suddenly! Do you not suppose there will be quite as dreadful a scene, when she learns what has happened?"

"Suffer us to pass, if you please," said Vashti.

"Stand still, Philip and Elise. Vashti, your bonny cavalier is an arrant coward as ever I saw. If it depends on his personal efforts to carry you off, you'll never get away. But they say people always marry their opposites."

Percy Dascomb was just as mean-spirited and cowardly as Margery pronounced him; but as Vashti looked at him in haughty expectation of something to refute this stinging taunt of Margery's, and as, after all, two women and one old man were not very formidable, he took a brisk pace or two toward them, saying:

"I'm just coward enough, Miss Margery, to shrink from a contest with women; but if this lady on my arm commands me to force a passage, I consider myself bound to obey her behest."

"Philip, you ought to have muscle enough to pitch him over the fence. He can't be very heavy. I'm sure I have

seen you fling twice as great a weight twice as far as that," said Margery Gresham, turning coolly to Philip.

The old man, thus addressed, stepped from behind Miss Gresham. Percy Dascomb involuntarily dropped back a pace or two, crying:

"Don't touch me, old man."

"I have no intention of doing so, sir. Miss Vashti," laying a hand on her arm, "won't you give this over for the present? As you say, you have a right to marry whom you please; but not in this manner—not in this disgraceful manner. Go back to the house, my dear Miss Vashti; your mother will give her consent in time, if you continue to desire it; and then what a gallant wedding we will have!"

"I cannot, cannot, Philip; they will never consent, any of them. Frank is as much opposed as mamma; they will never consent, till their consent has ceased to be necessary. I must go; I will go. You have often said of us Everleighs that we always go our own gait. It is idle and worse to argue with me. I shall certainly go as the sun will rise to-morrow morning. Open the gate for us, Philip."

"Leave the gate alone, Philip, and pitch that fellow into the road," called Miss Gresham.

"I can't do it, ma'am, indeed," he answered Miss Margery, sadly. "I've obeyed the Everleigh voice too long to turn rebellious now. I can't do it, Miss Margery." So saying, he opened the gate with the profoundest respect, and held it for the pair to pass out.

Vashti paused as she came near him, extending her hand, with a

"Thank you, Philip."

"I'm much afraid you're going wrong, miss. God send you in the right road."

"I hope he may, Philip," and after a word with her companion, "I have been compelled to leave my trunk, Philip. It is ready packed in my room. Will you be kind enough to send it after me to Albany, if you have an opportunity—to the Livingstone House, State Street? Will you remember, Philip?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She said, "Good-by, Elise," without a word to Miss Gresham, and was assisted into the carriage which waited for them.

And so Margery Gresham went back up to the house without having accomplished her object, which really she had scarcely expected to do.

There was one consolation—Mrs. Everleigh was still in total unconsciousness of Vashti's escapade. She had given Margery *carte blanche* as to Vashti, so that she had told the truth to that willful girl in regard to her mother's orders.

It was destined to be an eventful night.

A little after midnight the ponderous knocker on the great door of the house was clanged with such vehement violence as to waken nearly every inmate. They came hurrying from their rooms to see what it was all about. Mrs. Everleigh was among them. She had wakened screaming, and possessed with what seemed like an insane conviction that this unusual summons concerned her particularly, she had joined the others in the great hall.

As Philip shot back the huge bolts, and the door swung open, a group of men entered, bearing what?

Oh, poor Mrs. Everlergh! Poor hapless mother! What —only Frank! Frank, with his black curls dabbled in blood, and a cleft on his white forehead, where the horse's

hoof had struck him. He had been coming home in mad haste to meet the "First of June;" too impatient to wait for morning, he had taken a horse and come on from Harts Corners on horseback. A mile or two back his horse had stumbled and thrown him, and he lay by the roadside till a party of gentlemen coming along discovered him; one recognizing him, they brought him home.

"He is not dead," said one, with a pitiful glance at the appalled faces round him.

The announcement came too late for poor Mrs. Everleigh, she lay at Margery's feet in strong convulsions.

They lifted her, and bore her to her room. Frank was taken to his room, the same one which had been his father's, and a man was started on the fleetest horse in the stables for Dr. Gracie.

The men who had brought him dropped off after a little, all save one, who, being in active attendance on Frank, it seemed necessary should remain.

Dr. Gracie came very soon. Frank proved not dangerously, though seriously hurt, but Mrs. Everleigh's case turned out to be the critical one. She continued in most frightful spasms all night, and by morning the tender-hearted doctor announced to the family that her case was utterly hopeless, she could not possibly live a week.

"Oh, if we could send for Vashti!" exclaimed Nora; and something to the same import dropped from Margery's unhappy lips.

"If there is anything I can do for you, pray command me," said the stranger, who had remained over night, and was passing at the moment.

Doctor Gracie thanked him, and as soon as he was out of hearing, said:

"Why not, Miss Margery? He seems very much a gen-

tleman, and a man who might be trusted in so delicate a matter as this."

"But he is a stranger, sir," said Miss Margery, doubtfully.

"I don't care for that. I call myself a judge of physiognomy; and I will stake my reputation, that the man is a perfect gentleman, body and soul."

"If he will," said Margery, "you will have to tell him something of the circumstances; there is no other way. And, oh doctor, if he shouldn't overtake them before they get to Albany, he'll find them at the Livingstone House, State street. I heard her tell Philip the address."

"Livingstone House, State street," the doctor muttered, taking out his pencil and writing on a slip of paper, and then leaving them to find the stranger.

Returning soon, he said to Margery in an undertone:

"All right; he's gone. I gave him a note for Vashti. Described the pair; runaway match—bring Miss Everleigh back—mother dying—and all that."

The good doctor meant no levity with his abrupt sentences, it was only a queer way he had, when deeply moved or greatly excited.

CHAPTER XXV.

TRIBULATION.

As Dr. Gracie had said, the gentlemanly stranger who had so kindly offered his services had immediately betaken himself to the performance of his errand. They—the runaways—had greatly got the start of him, but he did not despair of being able to overtake them. At the towns on the

route he heard tidings of them, but with his best efforts he did not overtake them till quite at their journey's end, late on the evening of the same day.

He followed them almost immediately into the parlor of the Livingston House, where Mr. Dascomb had left his charge alone a little while. She sat with her weary head leaning upon her hand, her bonnet off and on the carpet beside her. At the sound of her name, in strange tones, "Miss Everleigh," she started up from her position. The full blaze of the lamp fell on her pale, beautiful face; her strange, dusky eyes, looked straight at the stranger.

Both started.

"Professor Thorpe!" dropped almost unconsciously from her lips, and "Queen Vashti!" from his.

He was surprised, wonderfully so. The name, the faces at Everleigh, had struck him as singularly familiar, but he had never once thought who they reminded him of till he met her there. Taken by surprise as he was, be never for an instant suffered himself to forget his errand. He gave her the letter with a certain air of sternness.

Her great handsome eyes went over it like a flash. He had expected that she would faint, but she did not. Her face indeed blanched to an awful whiteness, but her voice was preternaturally calm as she asked:

"When can we go?"

"Now, if you are ready; my carriage is at the door. I have fresh horses waiting a mile or two from here. Shall we go?"

"Instantly."

She was going out without her bonnet. He took it from the floor and put it on her head. She suffered him even to tie the strings in a vague, unconscious way, and then to lead her out.

In the hall they met Dascomb.

"Vashti!" he exclaimed, "where are you going?"

She looked at him absently, and when he laid his hand on her arm she shook it off, saying, with her face turned from him:

"Mamma is dying."

"But Vashti," he called, as she swept on, following her in incredulous amazement, and putting his hand forth again to detain her.

She looked at him deliberately an instant with strange eyes, as though she had never seen him, and then calmly disengaging herself from him, said again:

"Mamma is dying."

Professor Thorpe put her in the carriage, pushing Dascomb back as he did so, for the man pressed forward, frantic at seeing his prospective bride torn from his arms in this abrupt and unexpected manner. Repelled from the side of the carriage he leaped to the horse's head, crying:

"It is a lie—a swindle! Give me back my wife!"

The vociferous outcries were gathering a crowd. Professor Thorpe turned to the lady.

"Are you his wife?"

"No," she answered, mechanically, with her pale, emotionless face looking straight before her.

"That lady is my wife," Dascomb called to the bystanders. "The villain is stealing my wife!"

They gathered in excited groups around the vehicle; the matter began to grow serious. Dascomb, releasing the horse's head, came round again to Vashti's side, and attempted to remove her. She coolly put him away, saying, "Wy don't you drive on?" to her companion.

"Stand off, sir, or I shall strike you!" said Thorpe, his temper by this time fully up, and raising his long-lashed

riding-whip over Dascomb's head, who recoiled involuntarily. "Hands off, my friends!" He lashed the horse as he spoke; the animal reared frantically, and, with a leap that nearly threw them out, dashed through the crowd and away down the dim street, and, like an arrow from a bow, was immediately lost to view.

Dascomb was like a madman. Something after the manner of that famous Richard of whom we have all heard, he issued frantic appeals for "A horse! a horse!" and, having obtained one after some-moments of delay, off he went, the crowd cheering and the boys hooting after him.

Professor Thorpe stopped a few miles out of town to get a fresh horse. He had made the exchange, and was persuading Vashti to drink a glass of water and have some refreshments, when Dascomb came foaming up, and, throwing himself from his horse, made some demonstrations of renewing the contest—taking care, however, to keep a safe distance from the horsewhip, which confronted him threateningly.

"I leave the matter entirely to the lady," said the professor. "It is her choice to go with me, and moreover, she is not your wife, nor ever likely to be, if you do not keep a more civil tongue in your head. Ask her yourself if she will go or stay. Oh, come as close as you like; I sha'n't strike you without fair warning."

He smiled grimly, and Dascomb came up once more to Vashti, extending his hands, and saying:

"Stay with me, dearest, till morning, and I will myself take you back to Everleigh."

His tender words seemed to strike no answering chord in her heart. She looked at him coldly, and, turning to Professor Thorpe, said, in her clear, passionless tones:

"Will you send him away? the sight of him is hateful to me."

"You are answered, sir; be off!" said the professor, passing the rejected refreshments and empty tumbler to an attendant, and leaping into the carriage with a warning flourish of his whip.

Dascomb fell back with a face of deadly whiteness, and eyes whose expression of malignity and hatred the professor and bystanders remembered long after.

Vashti preserved the same passive silence during the whole of that long night ride, never speaking save in monosyllables, and then only when addressed.

Morning was breaking in the rosy east when they reached Everleigh. As they drove through the avenue gate, and up to the house, Vashti shivered a little, but she seemed outwardly calm. Her hand, as it touched the professor's in descending from the carriage, was like ice.

He led her in. In the hall they met Margery Gresham and Doctor Gracie. She turned with an ill-repressed shudder from Margery, saying, with her eyes on the doctor's face.

"Is my mother dead? Have I killed her?"

The doctor and professer exchanced glances. The doctor said:

"Your mother is still alive, but knows no one."

And Professor Thorpe, taking both her unresisting hands in his, said, with his pitying glance:

"There is some misconception here. Your brother was thrown from his horse and severely injured. It was the shock of seeing him brought in apparently dead that caused your mother this alarming attack of illness. She does not yet know that you have even left the house."

"What was Frank coming home for? On my account?

I know he was—so it is I who have killed her all the same."

He dropped her hands and walked to the door to conceal the emotion that was struggling over his countenance, and she passed silently on to her own room, where, having exchanged her traveling-robes for her usual home dress, she came out, pale as a statue of Niobe, but collected in her demeanor, and firmly determined to go to her mother. It was in vain that the good doctor, fearing the effects of so frightful a scene upon her in her present unnatural state of mind, opposed her approaching Mrs. Everleigh. She bade him feel her pulse, and assured him, with singularly quiet tones, that she was as calm as she ever was in her life.

"Your pulse does not say so. Your nervous system is in an awful state of tension. How do you feel bodily?"

"Well, except a sort of numbness over me that seems as if it would never let me feel mental or physical pain again."

"And which is one of the premonitions of the family doom," the physician said, inwardly, as he looked anxiously at her.

"My head was aching yesterday, but I feel no pain now, although I have not slept for two nights and days," she added, with a faint smile, meant to reassure him of her perfect fitness for her undertaking.

"You must retire to your room and try to sleep," Doctor Gracie said. "I don't want another patient on my hands. I shall give you a strong narcotic and send you to bed."

She shook her head.

Just then the door of Mrs. Everleigh's room opened and some one came out. Through the open door and down

the meandering passage sounded the screams and cries of one in mortal agony.

Vashti turned her calm eyes to the doctor's face inquiringly.

"Go to your bed," he said, soothingly. "Your mother's room is no place for you."

"Were those sounds from her room? I must go to her instantly."

"You must not."

She looked at him with her deliberate, unmoved eyes.

"I know," she said, "you fear any great excitement for me. You think it will precipitate the malady that waits at every turn of our lives like a blood-thirsty wolf greedy to fasten its cruel fangs upon our souls. You see I know all about it, doctor. Your efforts and Margery Gresham's have entirely failed of keeping the truth from me; but I never in my life was farther from that of which you are thinking. I realize everything with what seems to me preternatural distinctness, but I have no sense of pain connected with it. I see my duty too clearly now to be turned aside from it, except by literal force, which I sure you have no idea of employing, as it would be much more dangerous than to suffer me to have my own way.

Thus saying, she went with her usual slow, graceful step to her mother's room, the astounded doctor offering no resistance, but following her with a terrible misgiving in his heart.

Miss Dale, Nora, Margery, Elise were all there. The bed had been drawn to the center of the room, that they might get on every side of it. Miss Dale was holding one of the sufferer's hands, she being for the instant quiet. She yielded her place to Vashti's peremptory movement with a startled astonishment too great for words, and her

wild eyes searched the girl's pale face with an intensity of inquiry. She had not known till that moment that she had even been sent for. Nora's greeting of her sister was only an eloquent and tearful glance from her to mamma.

The poor lady was in a frightful state. The paroxysms were so violent as nearly to throw her from the bed, but for the watchfulness of her attendants; drops of agony stood upon her face, every feature was distorted, and foam flecked her purple lips. Her moans and cries were heart-rending. Yet through it all, Vashti was the same preternaturally calm and self-possessed being. Margery Gresham looked almost afraid of her; and Nora, at the first opportunity, whispered through white lips:

"What ails you, Vashti?"

For the first time her eyes took a sad and stern expression, as she replied:

"God has taken away my heart of flesh, and given me a heart of stone. It is a righteous judgment."

"How long can she live, probably?" she asked Dr. Gracie, soon after.

"She cannot live the day out if these paroxysms continue," was the reply. "She has no vitality; her constitution is entirely sapped by previous illness."

"Will she come to herself sufficiently to know me?"

"I cannot tell—it is quite probable; but she will sink rapidly when these spasms leave her."

All day Vashti never left the bedside for an instant—not to see Frank, not to eat, not to drink. She swallowed several times a cup of strong tea which a servant brought her, and mechanically ate a piece of bread, without stirring from her mother's side.

As the afternoon waned, the paroxysms grew more and more violent. Nora left the room at intervals, unable to

endure the scene, but as often came back, quite as unable to remain away, cowering in a corner of the room, powerless to render any assistance, but fascinated to the spot. Dr. Gracie ordered her to her own room at last, blaming himself for not having done so before, and promising to call her the instant any change should occur.

Margery Gresham looked like a ghost, and was tremulous with excitement and fatigue, but refused to leave that terrible dying bed. Elise was too overcome to be of much use, and Dr. Gracie acknowledged to himself, with a burst of emotion, that the dauntless presence of that unconquerable Vashti was worth more than that of all the rest together. She never flinched from her post, she never wavered when the awful agony of the dying woman wrung sharp cries from the others, but with her calm, white hands now wiped the agony drops from the poor, distorted face, now moistened the swollen and parched lips, or rubbed the continually cramping muscles.

From one spasm, more violent than any before had been, the sufferer fell away into perfect quietude, her eyes closed as if in sleep. Dr. Gracie motioned them to the utmost silence, and going noiselessly from the room himself, brought Nora to see her mother die. Frank, alas! was unable even to be told of the blow that impended.

Mrs. Everleigh slept, or seemed to sleep, a full quarter of an hour. Then her blue eyes opened wide, and went with a slow, inquiring gaze over the tender faces around. Vashti held her in her arms, a scarlet flush staining her cheeks, and her great wild eyes motionless no longer, but luminous with frightened entreaty.

"Mamma, forgive—forgive poor Vashti!"

The dying woman looked at her with unutterable affection; her lips moved, but gave forth no sound; her eyes

closed. Lifting the almost nerveless hand, Vashti laid it on her head, crying passionately:

"Mamma, bless Vashti!"

Like one called back from death to life, and hovering there, the dying mother opened her fast glazing eyes, saying in a feeble whisper something, of which those standing round gathered the words "blessed," and "forgiven."

Her hand slipped from Vashti's head, its pulse had stopped. There was a sound of low sobs in the room that death had entered, and Vashti, not fainting, but feeble as a little child, with the reaction upon her overwrought powers, had to be supported to her bed, where she immediately fell away into a long slumber, so deep, so still, so almost breathless, that Nora longed to wake her, lest she, too, should die.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

Dr. Gracie made no attempt to conceal his anxiety with regard to Vashti. He had a guard posted at each entrance of the passage leading by her door, with the most positive orders to maintain the utmost silence. No one was suffered to even enter the passage, save himself, Margery Gresham, or Nora. Margery Gresham placed herself at the very threshold of the door, leaving it only for a short interval of rest, and the anxious expression of her deep gray eye was something almost fearful to look upon. The household was hushed to the utmost silence; the servants went about as if shod with list.

Dr. Gracie had not been home since his abrupt summons to the house two days before. He went now for a very brief space, leaving a charge with Miss Margery, to preserve the silence he had imposed, as she valued life, and more than life.

"I tell you, Miss Margery," he said, "if by any chance that girl is waked before nature wakes her, it is all over with her. I wouldn't give that," with a snap of his fingers, "for her chance—life or reason, one would have to go by the board."

It was a dreary house. The doctor's daughter, now Mrs. Ashley, came over the evening of Mrs. Everleigh's death, and she and Elise prepared the poor lady for the grave.

All the night after her mother's death Vashti lay like a person in a syncope, to all appearance. The day and night following, it was much the same, though during the latter portion of the time she stirred a little. In the afternoon of the second day, as they were bearing away the dead, she opened her feeble eyes and looked with a bewildered air about her.

Dr. Gracie was at hand, but as her wondering glance fell on him she only shivered a little as at some vague recollection that had saddened her, and turned her face on the pillow away from him, rubbing her forehead slowly with her slender fingers, and occasionally half rising and looking about her with strange eyes, as though she was trying to remember where she was, and sighing deeply. Finally, reaching the curtains of the window near her bed, she pulled it aside and looked out.

This window commanded a view of the Everleigh burial ground in the distance. It lay this afternoon, half in the shadow half in the sun, and the funeral procession was just winding its solemn, slow way, among the tombs.

Vashti looked, as they are wont to look, who look their last upon a dearest friend—looked till a mist of blessed tears gathered over her aching eyes, and she fell back upon her pillow weeping—weeping as she had never wept before.

"Thank God," said Dr. Gracie to himself, as he went silently, and on tiptoe, from the room, to pace gently to and fro in the passage, and going now and then to Vashti's door, to cautiously look at her.

Returning from that sorrowful grave, Margery Gresham and Nora immediately sought news from Vashti.

"Saved," said the kind-hearted physician, meeting them, and Nora went, with his permission, in to see her sister. Margery did not offer to do so, but she was none the less thankful, that this blow had been averted.

Vashti was saved, Dr. Gracie said, but it was long before she came out of her room. She was reluctant to leave it, apparently very much prostrated in body, mind, and heart.

It was in vain that Nora pleaded:

"Come out and walk with me under the trees, sister, the air will do you good."

She only turned her head on the pillow away from Nora's kind eyes, and put her loving hands away, with an almost impatient movement.

Meanwhile Frank, mending rapidly, when he once began to mend, had been told of his sad bereavement, and bore it much better than they had hoped. He was soon down stairs again, owing his rapid convalescence, he said, and Dr. Gracie, too, to the attention of Professor Thorpe, to whom he seemed to have taken a wonderful fancy.

"Supposing you go and see Vashti, professor," Frank said to him, one day, as he came from a visit to his sister. "I believe she needs society—something to distract her

thoughts, and take that woe-begone look out of her face. What do you say—will you go?"

"Did I ever tell you, Frank, that I knew your sister years ago?"

"No!" with a profoundly-astonished look.

"Well, I did. I was Professor of Languages at Laurel Hill while she attended school there. I knew her again the moment I saw her."

"That is just the thing; you can go in on the score of old acquaintance. Come, now, you've such a way with you, who knows what may come of it?"

Professor Thorpe deliberated about two minutes, and announced his willingness to make the experiment.

The faintest possible flush came into Vashti's pale face as he entered. He went up to her, and, taking the hand she had not extended to him, pressed it kindly. She turned her face away from him; but from where he stood he could see her closed eyes, and the tears forcing themselves through the inky lashes, and falling one by one upon the pillow. He made his call a short one this time; but the next day he came again, and staid longer, talking, not to Vashti, but Nora, and noticing with a knitting of his heavy brows that she gave neither word nor sign of being conscious of his presence.

The next day he had purposed leaving Everleigh, but he very gravely announced to Frank that he should remain till he saw some change in his whilom pupil, and at his usual hour he made his appearance in Vashti's room. She had got so that when she heard him coming, she invariably turned her face away from the door, and did not look toward him while he staid.

He lifted her passive hand with his usual kindly pressure, and sat down near the bed.

Nora, sitting a few steps away, looked almost dismayed when he took from his pocket a book, and, having first asked permission, began to read without waiting for it to be given.

His selection was from Cowper—one of the saddest, most despairing plaints that he wrote in that memorable, despondent state when he suddenly discovered himself without God in the world. Thorpe read it with an expression that made each word a wail. As he closed the book, Vashti, half rising, cried almost passionately:

"What do you read that to me for? Cowper's pain is not to be compared to mine—a miserable, God-forsaken wretch from the hour of my birth—haunted by evil passions, haunted and hunted down!"

Nora left her seat and went and stood by her sister, putting her hand on her hand, with tears in the brown eyes she lifted to Vashti's face.

Vashti flung her hand off, and, still supporting herself on her elbow, said, bitterly:

"Oh, don't pity me—I don't want to be pitied! Hate me rather than pity me."

"Oh, sister, sister! don't treat me so; it breaks my heart. I love you and sympathize with you. Are we not both of the same blood?" said Nora, clasping her hands, and with tears raining down her cheeks.

"Sympathize, indeed! you! Look at her, Professor Thorpe, the bonny, pure-faced, brown-eyed thing, to talk of sympathy for a fiery creature like me! Stand away, Nora; to touch me would defile you."

She spoke even more bitterly than before, and her short, upper lip curled with intensest scorn.

Professor Thorpe was surveying her with a painful sem-

blance of that old, quiet smile of his—painful because it was tinged now with sarcasm, moroseness.

That smile of his stirred Vashti to passionate resentment, and placing her foot on the floor with a firmness she had seemed little capable of before, she said to Nora, who was drying her eyes and resolutely trying to drive back her tears:

"You and I are of the same name, but there is not another single point of resemblance between us. Don't pretend to sympathize with me, then—nobody can do that—nobody ever carried through life the betrayed spirit I have. I don't say that anybody is to blame but myself; but does that make it any better? Isn't it as bad to betray one's self as to have others do it for one? Don't pity me, Lenore; it is the one drop too much. I feel tempted as Job was, to curse God and die."

Professor Thorpe was standing at a window, with his back to her and Nora.

"Speak to her," Nora whispered, going up to him; "she will hear you, but she won't hear me. Tell her this blind, hostile spirit of hers is not putting herself in His hands who made her for good and not for evil. Will you tell her, sir?"

"I can't——" He shrunk away from her pure, earnest eyes, fearing to speak what was on his lips; but, in a moment, chiding himself for what he was pleased to call to himself a sort of moral cowardice, he added: "I can't for I don't believe it myself, Lenore."

He looked down at her with a grave, sad smile, and a look in his deep azure eyes, that all his bravery could not make strong or in the least courageous, in the face of that startled expression that came out of Nora's brown eyes.

"Do you mean, sir, that you don't believe——" She

was quite at a loss how to finish the sentence—how to understand him.

He bowed, without any smile this time, with even a faintly clouded visage, saying:

"That is just it, Miss Nora; I don't believe it myself."

And presently he went away out of the room without another word.

Nora looked at her sister with a deep, involuntary sigh. She had not stirred as Professor Thorpe left the room; she seemed buried in unhappy thought. Nora shrank painfully from the fierce retorts so peculiar to her sister when she addressed her, but feeling that she could not suffer the moment so pregnant with warning to pass unimproved, she said, sadly, and with gentle firmness:

"I must tell you, Vashti, that the great Father of Omnipotence cannot mold you to His purpose unless you yield yourself to him."

Vashti lifted her dark, haughty gaze to Nora's face, looking at her silently some moments.

But the feverish excitement that had lately possessed her was by this time quite gone, and with a more weary, despairing expression than ever, she crept back upon her bed, and turning her face to the wall, refused to answer anything.

The following day, early in the morning, Professor Thorpe rapped at Vashti's door. Nora opened it for him.

"I want your invalid for a walk," he said, looking beyond her to Vashti.

"Oh, sir, if you could coax her out——"

"Are you not afraid to trust her with me, after what I said to you yesterday?" he said, in a low voice, and with an attempt at lightness.

"No, sir," she answered, bravely. "A man who could

read 'The Castaways,' as you did yesterday, must feel it. May you anchor where poor Cowper did, sir."

He flashed a look at her both curious and startled, and passing her, entered the room.

Vashti was sitting in a low arm-chair near the window, for the first time in many days.

"So you are better already," he said, with a tone of slight raillery. "I knew that dose of excitement I gave you yesterday would do you good. Isn't this morning air tempting? Isn't the scent of those roses delicious? Come out with me a step or two."

He took a shawl from Nora's hand as he spoke and stood waiting for Vashti to rise, which, greatly to Nora's delighted surprise, she did.

Professor Thorpe threw the shawl round her shoulders, put her bonnet on with his own hands, and drawing her hand within his arm with an irresistible air of authority, led her out into the fragrance of the early morning.

Nora followed soon, with uncovered head and radiant face.

What they talked of, Vashti could not have told an hour after. The professor talked most indeed to Nora, but she enjoyed it more than she could have believed possible, and could hardly credit her sister's smiling assertion that they had been out an hour, when she found herself wiled in at the great door, and seated in the sitting-room, instead of her own apartment.

Frank was already there, and became boisterously gay on seeing his sister.

"Where is Miss Dale?" Vashti presently asked.

"In her own room," Nora answered. "She has scarcely left it in a long time, except for her meals, and those she takes in the servants' hall instead of the dining-room."

"In the servants' hall? Why should she do that?" said Vashti, looking more like herself than before in weeks, "I trust you did not make her unwelcome in the dining-room?"

"I had no opportunity to do so," said Nora, quietly, though inwardly nettled at the censure implied in her sister's words. "She has never once entered the dining-room since—since mamma's death," she was about to say, but she changed it to "since Professor Thorpe has been here, though I have myself asked her to do so several times. I am incapable of treating any, even pretended friends of our family, in a rude manner."

Nora was sorry the next instant that that she had suffered herself to say "pretended friends." Vashti's cheeks flushed warmly, and she said to Professor Thorpe:

"The very best friend I ever had, sir, Miss Dale is. You have met her, I hope, somewhere else, if not in the dining-room?"

"Miss Dale—Miss Dale," said Thorpe, half to himself; it seems to me I have heard the name before, but I have not met the lady here; no."

"She is one of Vashti's pets," said Frank, in a rather equivocal tone; "no favorite of mine or Nora's however. Don't be vexed Vashti, but really the woman is a decided nuisance. One can't help their likes and dislikes," he added, apologetically, as his sister's face flushed still deeper with displeasure.

Frank had never particularly liked or disliked Miss Dale till lately, when a conversation with Nora regarding "poor mamma," and Miss Dale's influence over her, had somewhat opened his eyes.

Miss Dale, too, it had been discovered, was in possession of a very singular document, signed by Mrs. Everleigh—

something in the nature of a will, though not in legal form, and unattested by witnesses. It conveyed, so far as it could, a large portion of Mrs. Everleigh's personal property—the dower which she had brought to her husband—to her dear and esteemed friend, Miss Dale, and commended that lady, in the most affectionate terms, to her children.

In the light of the sad story which Nora told of Mrs. Everleigh's subjection—for it was nothing less—to her demonstrative and aspiring companion, this document seemed to be the wages for which Miss Dale had exerted herself; and of the manner in which she had obtained the poor lady's signature to this highly original document, Elise, fortunately, was able to testify, which she did in most moving terms.

"I was sweeping in the passage," she said, "that leads from the mistress' room to Miss Dale's. I had only just come there, and it was nearly dark. I had forgotten it earlier in the day, and as I came into the passage from the hall, Miss Dale ran through from the mistress' room to her own and back again, in so big a hurry that she didn't see me at all, standing there in the dark. In her hurry she left the door a little ajar, and in a moment I heard the mistress say, in a sad voice, down-hearted like:

" 'Wouldn't it be better, Miss Dale, to wait and tell the children? I am sure they would do it just as much for my asking.'

" 'Oh, very well, very well,' said Miss Dale, in a very different voice from the one I had always heard her use to the mistress; 'if you grudge me a small affair like that for my faithful services, let it go. It won't be much matter if I do starve. Such an ungrateful world as this is, though!'

"The mistress said something in reply that I could not catch the meaning of; she seemed to be crying. Miss Dale answered her in the same cross voice:

"'There, don't go and worry yourself sick. Now, I'm sure I haven't slept for a week, for waiting on you with that last spell. If you don't want to sign it, say so, and I'll burn the thing up. As I've said a great many times, I made up my mind long ago, that I should probably die so poor I should have to be buried at the public expense.'

"'If it would relieve you so much,' I heard the mistress say, 'I will sign it. I can't write all that, though—I'm too sick to do it.'

"'It isn't worth a straw, if it is not in your writing,' I heard Miss Dale say; then followed a good deal of low talk that I couldn't hear, but I could tell from Miss Dale's voice, that she wasn't in a pleasant way, and pretty soon I heard the pen scratching on the paper, and creeping up to the door, I could see the mistress writing and looking quite out of heart, while Miss Dale read to her from a paper she had in her hand. Miss Dale came pretty soon and shut the door, and do what I would, I couldn't hear another word. I went away pretty soon, and was very unhappy about what I had heard, but I didn't at all know what to do about it, and I tried to forget what I thought could do nobody any good to know, till I heard that Miss Dale pretended she had a will; and when I came to hear what was in it, I knew it was the very same thing I had overheard them talking about, for I recognized some of the words, and it made me feel so badly, I thought I must come and tell you, Mister Frank."

Frank with difficulty held still till she finished her painful recital, he was in such a towering passion. After his usual boisterous style, he swore roundly that he would pay that vile creature, Miss Dale, the sum she claimed, and

kick her out of doors. No doubt the hot-headed young fellow would have proceeded to carry out his threat in the most liberal manner, had not Nora interposed, and by reminding him who had lain a corpse in the house so short a time before, cooled his wrath somewhat, and saved him from so disgraceful a proceeding.

Miss Dale had been paid the sum she claimed, to the uttermost farthing, and had been notified that the sooner she left Everleigh, the better its inmates would be satisfied; and still she remained.

This it was that had embittered the minds of Nora and Frank toward Miss Dale, that neither found it possible to speak of her, save in the manner they had done, in reply to Vashti's inquiries after her. Both, however, when they saw how excited she grew in her feeble state over it, endeavored to make their apologies, and place matters on the smooth footing they were before this unfortunate conversation came up.

Vashti, however, was suddenly silent, and sat looking gloomily before her, lost in what looked very like a sullen train of thought.

Suddenly, some one passed along the corridor. By the sweep of her draperies, and the mincing grace of her step, it was the very one they had been speaking of—Miss Dale.

With a half defiant glance at Frank and Nora, Vashti called out, "Miss Dale," and following her, brought the—it must be confessed—rather reluctant lady in, to be introduced to Professor Thorpe.

The professor looked both curious and amused at this abrupt proceeding, and Frank with a muttered something, that sounded very like an oath, went straight out of the room. Nora did not like to vex her sister, but she could not bring herself to be willing to remain, in her present

state of feeling, in the same room with this woman, and she accordingly followed Frank's example, in a more quiet and decorous manner, however.

The professor, meanwhile, paying the courtesies of the day to Miss Dale, who, assured, was all flash and glitter, grew graver and graver as he talked, preoccupied with some inward thought, till Miss Dale, constrained in spite of herself, under his searching eye, directed her efforts at conversation more especially to Vashti.

He broke in on the not over brilliant chat with:

"I think I have seen you before, Miss Dale——"

"Indeed sir?" she began, bridling. "I don't remember ever meeting you before."

"But you have," he said, decidedly, rising, and standing tall before her. "I remember you perfectly now. I have a great memory for faces and names, momentarily backward sometimes, but I can depend upon it entirely, when it does speak."

Miss Dale bridled and smiled again, and was silent.

"I saw you," he continued, "it must be ten—twelve years ago—at Newbury, at a party. You will remember the evening by an accident that occurred, that came near proving fatal to a lady of the party—yourself. By some means, in the jostle of a rather rough game, you were thrown from your feet into the midst of a great furnace of a fire-place. Fortunately you were snatched from the flames, badly frightened, and some burned, not dangerously, owing to the woolen fabric of your dress."

She smilingly assented to the account of the grave professor, and was already opening her lips for a voluble recital of that thrilling episode to which he had referred, when he continued:

"Some months after, while I was studying with the Rev. Mr. Hibbins, at Crawford——"

He paused a little, for Miss Dale had risen from her seat with the most sudden and wild confusion. He said, sternly :

"Sit down, madam. I am resolved that you shall hear me out in the presence of this young lady, whose confidence you have abused. Sit down," he repeated, as she was continuing her flight, "or I will call Francis Everleigh ; you know very well what consideration you have reason to expect from him."

She sat down near the door, looking sullen but cowed, and he continued :

"One evening, as I was saying, a pair came to the Rev. Mr. Hibbins, where I was, to be married—a runaway couple they were, no doubt—young, interesting, etc. I was in the next room, and kept myself out of sight, for I recognized you ; and, as sure as I am standing here, I saw you take another name, by a legal ceremony of marriage, a name that you do not go by now. Pray, madam, are you divorced, or a widow, or had your handsome lover already a wife when he married you?"

Miss Dale started to her feet again, but at a significant gesture from Thorpe, sat down again, while Vashti, unable to comprehend the meaning of this unaccountable scene, looked from one to the other in vague and uneasy dread.

"Perhaps you can tell me, madam," Thorpe continued, with dry, sarcastic utterance, "whether a gentleman I had the pleasure of meeting a few weeks since, was or was not a party in the marriage ceremony just mentioned? I thought his handsome, villainous face looked singularly familiar, but I could not think where I had met him till after I had left him——"

Miss Dale started up with an impetuous movement.

"I will not be tortured piecemeal," she said, "as though I was a criminal. I have done no crime, and I will not be treated as if I had. I have a right to take what name I please, and I won't be made responsible for the misdeeds of others——"

He glanced significantly from her to Vashti, who was devouring her with lurid eyes.

The ex-governess gave a nervous toss of her head as her eye followed his, and she jerked out rather than spoke :

"Percy Dascomb is my husband—there! Make the most of it."

With a passionate cry, Vashti sprang to her feet.

"Have you lied to me all this time? Have you, wretched creature, have you lied to me?"

"I am his wife," the woman said, cowering, but with an accent of mingled pride and relief that the tale was told, and he and Vashti forever severed. "I am his wife."

The passionate girl made a movement as though she would have struck her, and then, with a stamp of her proud foot, she said :

"God may forgive you, but I never can! Leave me while I retain my senses. Let me never put my eyes upon you again, vilest of all vile wretches upon the face of the earth!"

Mistress Percy Dascomb needed no second telling. She took herself out of the presence of the outraged and indignant girl with all the expedition she was mistress of.

Vashti dashed two or three hot tears from her proud eyes, saying, as she took up a vehement march about the room :

"Could any one expect me to be other than I am, with

a serpent like that gnawing at my vitals? How I trusted that woman! Professor Thorpe, I believed in that creature, and her influence over me has been diabolical. Will you ring the bell, sir?" and to the servant who answered it, she said:

"See if Miss Margery Gresham is in her own apartments, and ask if she will permit me to see her a few moments."

While the servant was gone, she continued her excited pace to and fro, murmuring disjointedly, pausing now and then for a curt word or two to Professor Thorpe, who, making her no verbal reply, stood with his elbow on the top of a high-backed chair, watching her with the very expression in his deep eyes that had so aggravated her the day before.

"Miss Margery will see you now, Miss Vashti," said the servant at the door.

She swept him a formal courtesy, and with her slow, graceful step, left the room.

Margery Gresham did not pretend to conceal her surprise at this call from Vashti, whom she had scarcely spoken with since before Mrs. Everleigh's death.

"I have come," Vashti said, abruptly, remaining by the door, with her hand on the latch; "I have come to ask your pardon for my treatment of you in that affair about Dascomb. You were right, Miss Gresham, and I was wrong. Miss Dale is Percy Dascomb's wife! Mean, pitiful liars, both of them. I ask your pardon, madam, and I thank you for your efforts to ssve me from becoming the betrayed and disgraced creature I should now be but for the thunderbolt that broke my mother's heart."

It was the first time Vashti had alluded to her mother since her death. Standing there, with a haughty air that

seemed to demand rather than crave pardon, this reference to her mother, that had, as it were, forced itself from her lips, melted her to such touching softness of demeanor, that Miss Margery, with that fresh grief lacerating her own heart, took a step toward the girl, with outstretched hands, saying :

"For the sake of that mother, who loved me and whom I loved, Vashti, let us be friends. Call me Aunt Margery, as you used to do."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Vashti, recoiling close to the wall from her. "My father stands between us. You and I friends? No, no."

Margery Gresham's extended hands dropped to her side, and she looked at Vashti with a white cheek and dumb horror in her eyes. Faltering away from her, she sat down, leaning her head upon her hand in gloomy thought.

The latch clicked—Vashti was going out.

"Vashti," she said, in so changed a voice that the girl started, "come back to me and tell me all, and what you mean. Why should your father, of all others, stand between us?"

Vashti stood a moment in the door, trembling so that she could hardly stand, and then coming into the room, closed the door, and supporting herself by a chair, said, with a face like a corpse :

"I have been told, Margery Gresham, that my father did not die as others do. I know he did not. I can remember the mystery that surrounded his death-bed, the unseemly haste with which he was put in his grave. Tell me, how did my father die—by his own hand?"

"No."

"How, then?"

Shaking as with a palsy, Vashti, unable to stand, slipped

to her knees, and leaned her crossed arms upon the seat of a chair.

"How then? How then?" Margery Gresham repeated, in a sort of appalled maze. "Vashti Everleigh, what do you mean? Tell me, in so many words, what do you mean?"

"If my father did not shorten his own life, who did? Margery Gresham, you know who did, I know—almost I know. It is for that reason my lips never touch your hand nor your cheek—for that reason my heart recoils from the thought, the very thought of you. Don't tell me you did it at his bidding. The pallor of your face, the horror in your eye, tell me that you are a conscious-stricken woman. Some dark mystery lies back of all I know on this terrible subject. Tell me what it is—you only can do it."

The pallor of Margery Gresham's face was indeed frightful, and she only said, with the same appalled look as before:

"When you are quite well and calm enough to bear to hear what I have to say, I will tell you—not now. I have borne mountain-weights of sorrow in this unhappy house—I can bear even this."

The girl's white lips opened to speak; but bringing her hand down with fierce emphasis upon the table at which she sat, Margery said:

"As I live, I will tell you nothing now. Do you think I would endure to know that you cast this foul suspicion on me, and not say one word to exonerate or defend myself, if my reasons for being silent were not powerful ones? No, I will not tell you now. Get you away to your room, and carry your evil thoughts with you. I have borne much from you before now—I will show you how I can bear this."

The passion in Miss Gresham's tone producing a counter excitement in Vashti's mind, calmed her almost instantly. She rose from her knees and sat down.

"I will not go from this room," she said, "till I have freed my mind on one other point. You are fond of saying that you have borne a great deal from me—of making bitter allusions to my fierce temper, and that of others. You are fond of saying that you have devoted yourself to our family. Perhaps you have; but let me tell you, if so, that you have worse than thrown yourself away. You have been the combustible that has fed the flame. You have never, to my knowledge, delivered to one of us a single rebuke upon this subject of temper, but that you have shown yourself, at least, quite as angry as we were. We never had faith in you, for we saw, or thought we saw, that your reproofs were mere outbursts of a spirit vexed and stormy as our own. You took upon you this task of redeeming us Everleighs from this sin that does so easily beset us with a bitter heart, Margery Gresham. You carried out a bitter theory in a bitter way, and behold the fruits—bitter; your reward is—*ashes!*"

Margery Gresham sat without a word. For the first time in all their two lives her eyes fell before Vashti's. She had not a word to say for herself. This charge she could not answer more than the other; and her eyes wavered, for she began to see vaguely, as in a dream, herself—to suspect, in the light of that strong language, that she, the stern, self-reliant woman, had been—mistaken.

CHAPTER XXVII.

REVELATIONS—DESPAIR.

Vashti left Miss Gresham's room with an unfaltering step, and having sent for Pete, the coachman, gave him orders to have the carriage immediately put in readiness for a trip to Hart Corners. Then summoning Elise, she gave into her hand a special commission to be served instantly "on her you call Miss Dale, Elise. She is Mr. Dascomb's wife. I want her out of the house. I cannot even be courteous to her if she continues here longer than is absolutely necessary. Say to her, respectfully, of course, that the carriage waits to take her to Hart Corners; and stick to her, Elise, till you get her out of the house. I will not answer for myself if I ever put eyes on her again. I shall go to my room for two hours, that I may avoid meeting her. At the expiration of that time I expect you to have started her on her journey—anywhere away from here, bag and baggage. Stay—do you know if she has any wages due her? I would not send her off unpaid."

"Not a cent, dear miss. Mister Frank, I know, paid her, and gave her to understand pretty plain that the sooner she went the better for all parties concerned."

"Indeed. How long have you all known the disgraceful truth regarding this affair?"

"I never knew it before you told me, miss. It was not for that Mr. Frank wanted her to go. It was another trick o' hers he found out. I dare say there's plenty we never shall know anything about."

"Another trick, Elise, what pray?"

Elise hesitated, but knowing her young mistress' imperious disposition, said:

"She just claimed the biggest part of the money your mother brought to your father when she married him. That is what it was, and enough, too; and she had no more right to it than I, either. Mister Frank paid her every cent, though."

"But, Elise, I don't understand; how could she claim this money?"

"She pretended she had a will, miss. Mr. Professor—the gentleman that has done us such a good turn here—said it wasn't worth anything in law, though it was in your mother's writing, but Mister Frank said the money was nothing—he'd give her twice as much, if she'd only clear out. Of course he knew best, miss, but I wouldn't have paid her a cent. The mistress never would have written that will, if she'd a known her as well as the rest of us does."

"That will do, Elise," said Vashti, compressing her lips, "go and do what I told you; get the creature out of the house," and she turned away from the attached servant.

In her own room an hour after, Elise brought her a letter, saying that the quondam Miss Dale had gone, and had bidden her give this into Vashti's own hands. Opening it like one in a dream, Vashti read:

"Vashti, I have been the firebrand at Everleigh that it was my ambition to be, for I hated you all—you first, because you were conceited, imperious, and disagreeable—and afterward, because you came between me and the man that I loved as you are quite incapable of doing. It was our plan to have you become his wife, and when he had obtained your portion as an Everleigh heiress—to take it, and flee the country, leaving you dishonored, to creep back to the proud gates of your home, a creature that I should not have envied! The plan failed, but I never was sorry, for I

was madly afraid that Percy might love you. Besides, by its failure, and by reason of my accession to such a snug little fortune as your mother left me, and your brother paid over to the utmost farthing, I have quite the upper hand of my dear Percy. I go to his arms. But before I leave, I cannot resist the temptation of a parting word—something in the way of a bequest to you all, for your kindness to me while under this roof.

"I have not lived here all this time without fathoming every secret of the dreary old place. Tell Margery Gresham I know the specter that haunts the Hermitage. I have seen the horrid, limbless trunk crawl, and I know why it wanders there.

"Margery Gresham murdered your father! Let her deny it if she dare. I have hinted this to you before, and it is the truth. She loved him before he married your mother, and to revenge herself for that she killed him, and, as if that were not enough she remained at Everleigh to make his children's lives as unhappy as she made his before he died. But for her he would never have raised his gun upon Neil Roque; she knew that the man was not dead, and that her victim would not meet with hanging if he lived. She made the matter sure with her own hand, Doctor Gracie being prime assistant and conspirator."

And so on several more pages, but Vashti had read enough. She did not faint—she was not of that sort—but she sat down upon the bed, wondering if there was another so miserable a wretch on the face of the earth, wondering if death was worse than the angry pain that seemed to snap her heart asunder.

Taking that terrible letter up again, her eyes fell upon this passage, at its close:

"In the fullness of time, when it suits me so to do, I

shall send the officers of justice to Everleigh. I retain my proofs of what I have told you."

She dropped it as though it had been fire, mumuring to herself:

"A heartless letter—a cruel, cruel letter! How could I ever have loved and trusted a being capable of wringing my heart so pitilessly?"

"Sister, won't you come and have dinner with us to-day?" said Nora, putting her head into the room.

"No; food would choke me," said Vashti, gloomily.

Nora glanced from her sister's ominous countenance to that wide-open letter, sighing involuntarily, and was leaving the room, when Vashti called after her:

"Will Miss Gresham be down to dinner?"

"I think not. Elise just told me she thought not. She is not well."

"And no wonder. I will go to her this moment—this instant. She shall see that I can be calm, even under these circumstances."

"What is it, Vashti? Please, please, sister, tell me!" cried Nora, anxiously, as her sister gathered up that terrible letter, crumpling it fiercely in her nervous grasp.

"Nothing to you—nothing; it is only that the woman you deem a saint has a hand that is red with the blood of an Everleigh. Out of my way—let me go to her this instant, I say!"

"Oh, Vashti, are you mad? Sister! sister! as God is truth, I believe it an infamous lie! That false woman has told you—she has lied to you!" and as her sister struggled to get away from her frantic clasp, she cried: "You will repent it, Vashti—you will live to repent it in dust and ashes—if you go to Aunt Margery in the state you are in now. I will not let you go. You shall not break the

heart of the noble woman who would die for us. Frank! Frank! Fr-a-n-k——"

Vashti burst away from her, tore away down the hall, up the stairs, and into Margery Gresham's room; while Nora, dropping upon her knees, with her face to the floor, sobbed uncontrollably.

"There, madam, there!" cried the reckless and passionate Vashti, thrusting Mrs. Dascomb's letter into the face and very eyes of the ghastly-visaged and astounded woman, who rose from the bed upon which she had been lying; "read that, and see that I know your wickedness—your crime! Confess, that I may thrust you forth as I would the dog that bit me!"

She looked an incarnation of fury—her eyes blazing, her face purple, and her wild hands beating the air.

Margery Gresham met her with undaunted gaze, while her heart seemed to fall dead within her.

"Vashti," she began, with unshaken voice.

"Don't talk to me! I'm not calm; I don't want to be calm again, ever. I wish I could die. Oh! woman. woman, will not your reckoning be a fearful one?"

Miss Gresham had silently, and with her fearless eye on the almost maddened girl, approached the bell-rope. With the utmost apparent composure she touched it, rung it again and again. Presently steps were heard approaching.

Vashti was walking the room now, a fierce and hurried walk, broken in upon by bitter appeals to Miss Gresham, who, to soothe her, had opened Mrs. Dascomb's letter and was pretending to read it.

Pretending? As much whiter than before as it could get grew Miss Gresham's ghastly face as she read, without any pretense about it.

Francis Everleigh and Professor Thorpe came into the

room together; Philip followed them, with his son Hubert. That peculiar summons upon the bell had been for him.

Margery Gresham just lifted her eyes from the paper in her hand to scan the excited and evidently anxious group.

"Nora is not here," she said. "Hubert, go for her."

The young man left the room without a word.

"Philip," she continued, in the same stern voice, "go and bring hither the keys of the Hermitage."

A wild cry broke from Vashti's lips.

"Don't take me there! Oh, don't take me there!"

She clung frantically to her brother, screaming:

"Save me! save me! save me, Frank! Don't take me there! I will be calm! I will, I will——"

Miss Gresham compressed her lips, without uttering a word. Francis Everleigh seemed suddenly stricken with the palsy. His knees shook under him, his face grew deathly white, and he staggered to a chair, unable to utter a syllable, or even support his sister.

Thorpe threw his strong arms about her, and held her, while he looked into her face with his strong eyes, and said:

"Nothing shall harm you, Vashti; nothing shall take you from my arm against your will. My darling, what is it you fear?"

She clung to him, sobbing hysterically.

"Don't let them come near me. Philip is coming back—there, there—murder—m-u-r-d-e-r!"

The servants were thronging in the hall. The screams of the terrified girl struck cold chills to the hearts of all who heard, and from lip to lip passed a terrible thought—a whispered sentence:

"She is going mad!"

Vashti heard it, Professor Thorpe heard it, and said sternly to Hubert, who was bringing Nora into the room :

"Drive that pack down stairs, the brutes !" and clasping Vashti closer, he said in her ear :

"You are safe with me—there is nothing to harm you—nothing."

"I will be calm, sir ; indeed, indeed I will. Don't shut me up like a beast, though. See, how calm I am. Don't touch me, Philip. Margery Gresham, I will kill you, if you come near me !"

Philip and Margery had risen and taken a step toward her. They paused and looked in each other's eyes aghast. Was this beautiful, proud young creature indeed mad?

Nora Everleigh, pure-faced, brown-eyed Nora Everleigh, standing near her sister, with her bewildered glance taking in this frightful scene, pressed close to her, saying in tones of angelic love and soothing :

"We all love you, Vashti. Don't be afraid of us, sister. What is it you fear?"

"I am mad, you know," she whispered to Nora. "Margery Gresham wants to put me in the Hermitage. That is where they put us all, you know, when we get this way."

Nora bravely kept all pain out of her eyes, as she said :

"You are mistaken, sister ; nobody wants to put you there. You are frightened now ; but, listen to me, Vashti, you are only frightened. Look at me, Vashti ; my dear, dear sister. I have always, always told you the truth, haven't I?"

Vashti lifted her woe-begone, wild face, and looked at Nora.

"My good angel," she said.

"Sister," with both her young, earnest hands upon her neck, "you are weak and ill, nervous. You are not fit to

bear excitement; and you have been seized with a panic of terror—that is all—you are as sane as I am——"

"What did Margery Gresham want of the keys, then?" Vashti said, in the subdued tone of an unconvinced child.

"What did you want of the keys, Aunt Margery?" said Nora, in her clear tones, her tender hands still upon Vashti's neck, and without turning her head.

"I had been accused of a terrible crime," Margery answered. "The proof of my innocence is in the Hermitage. It was to display that I sent for the keys."

"Margery, oh, Margery Gresham!" Vashti cried, breaking from Thorpe's arm, and throwing herself at Miss Gresham's feet, "prove that, prove it, and I will kiss the dust from your feet. I shall go mad, mad, mad, if you leave me in this terrible darkness that hems my soul round."

Miss Gresham was touched to her inmost heart. With a mixture of sternness and emotion, she lifted the trembling girl to her feet.

"If I prove it to you," she said, "it may be at a fearful cost to yourself. You are in a very excitable state, and, I am afraid, unable to bear reference to this unhappy affair ——"

"Miss Gresham, you mock me. I cannot, cannot bear this uncertainty of apprehension. I cannot live this way. I must know, I will know, all there is to know."

"Hubert, go and see if Dr. Gracie has come," Margery said. "I sent for him more than two hours ago." And, as the young man left the room, she continued to Vashti; "If Dr. Gracie thinks it is safe to lay this matter before you, it shall be done."

The strange girl, still palpitating with excitement, but with that singular spasm of terror quite gone, turned away,

pacing the room with folded arms and downcast eyes, as if unconscious of any other presence save her own.

Frank had not spoken, but with his bowed head sat evidently very much shaken from his composure.

Presently Hubert came in with Dr. Gracie, and in a few brief words Miss Gresham laid the state of the case before him.

His sharp, bright eye fastened itself upon Vashti's face, while his firm, kindly fingers were on her wrist. She lifted her heavy eyes to his face when he asked her, but dropped them again immediately, saying :

"It will be quite useless to pass sentence against me."

"So I see," he said, with an expression of deep seriousness, and to Margery Gresham, in a whisper : "As well now as any time. It is possible it may give her mind a turn. It will at least be a sort of negative relief to her ; nothing could be worse than the state she is in. She may bear it perfectly well, and the worst may happen ; there is no answering for a state of mind like that. We shall have to run the risk."

Vashti had taken up her gloomy walk again as the good doctor dropped her hand ; but at the first sound of Margery Gresham's voice she stopped, and her dark eyes never took themselves from the stern woman's face while she spoke.

"You know, Vashti, as well as I," Margery said, "the whole of that dreary episode regarding Neil Roque. This letter"—striking it with the back of her hand—"this letter lies. We did suppose that Neil Roque was dead ; we could not possibly suspect anything else—nobody did.

"The day that your father came home wounded, a mob followed him and filled the Everleigh grounds. The house was full of angry, disorderly soldiers, and when the law

stepped in, it was not much better. The sheriff's officers were imperious and insulting. If your father had stood his trial he would undoubtedly have been hung. Child, be patient; I must tell the story in my own way, and I will.

"Frank, sit down—I did not kill your father, though he begged us to do that, to save him from that ignominious death. Doctor Gracie once lived some years in India. While there he became informed of the existence of a drug that, administered to a person in proper quantity, throws them into a state so nearly resembling death as to deceive a very critical observer. Your father took the drug. All who were not in the secret supposed him dead. We filled the coffin that had been ordered with stones, and buried it in the Everleigh burial-place, and in the dead of night removed the living but still unconscious man to a room in the Hermitage which we had had fitted up for him. He came to himself the third day. He was recovering from his wounds, and was intending to leave the country as soon as he was able, but in his impatience of his fate, and his remorse regarding the life he supposed he had taken, as he grew better in health, he became capricious in his temper, indulging in boisterous fits of passion, and moody and silent by turns. We had obtained a trusty attendant for him, a man who had known him from his boyhood, and loved him, who was without family, and willing to be immured with him as long as it was necessary. He took a most singular and uncontrollable dislike to this man, and finally quarreled with him, giving such serious offense that we dared not let the man remain with him lest he should betray our secret. He was incapable of doing that, however, as after circumstances proved. About this time Doctor Gracie informed me that he was suspicious that this singular

aversion to his attendant was a symptom of the malady that was said to be hereditary in his family.

"Enough. Three months from the time of his supposed death we discovered that we had a raving madman on our hands. That is the specter that haunts the Hermitage."

Doctor Gracie and Professor Thorpe sprang to Vashti's side—she looked as if she was going to fall—but she spurned their outstretched hands, saying, with an unmoved voice, to Margery:

"Why have we never been told this before?"

There was a very heavy fall beside her. Poor Frank had fainted. She looked at him pitifully as they lifted him to a bed, saying sadly:

"Poor fellow! I never fainted in my life," and then, with her dusky eyes again on Margery's face, she waited for her reply.

"Your mother was too ill to be told when we removed your father to the Hermitage, and when we became aware of the other feature of his case, we did not dare to tell her; it would certainly have killed her. You, children, were too young to be told then, and afterward—it might have created such a scene as it would have been impossible to keep from your mother's knowledge."

Dr. Gracie, leaving Nora and Professor Thorpe by Frank, who was just waking to life again, turned to Vashti.

"In the whole of this recital," he said, "your aunt has quite left herself out. I must tell you—you must know—that in all that troublous time she was the sinew of our strength. We met with so many obstacles to our plans, it seemed like such a wild project, that we, Philip and I, should have been hopeless of success but for her. She took the burden of the affair upon her hands, and when

she knew that the malady of his house was about to overtake him, she vowed to devote herself to saving his children from his doom. I suspect that she had a hard time of it. Have you appreciated her, Vashti?" Do you realize now that this woman——"

Margery Gresham burst in upon him.

"Not another word," she said; "not another word. Dr. Gracie, I meant to do, but, Heaven forgive me, I have not done. I said I would warn them, but I have done it in such a manner as to render my warning null. I ought to have known that I was not fit, of all others, to show them the rock upon which their father stranded." She paused. Vashti was sternly silent. Nora, as she stood by Frank's side, lifted her aunt's cold hand and kissed it. Margery Gresham flung her arm about her, and drew her to her. "See, Vashti," she said, eagerly, "she loves me. I have one here to love me."

"Because you loved her," Vashti answered, shaking her head.

"But I loved you, too, Vashti. Vashti, melt from your gloom, and say one kind word to me."

Vashti looked in a dreary, half-bewildered manner about her.

"I would say it if I could, I will say it if I can, but there is no atom of kindness left in me. I feel bitter toward the whole world. This moment there is not a creature I love in all the wide creation—for which I would lift my hand."

Margery Gresham did not seem the same woman, so greatly had the last few hours changed her. She crossed the room to Vashti, wringing her hands, and saying in a low voice, so hoarse with emotion that the rest did not hear her;

"Is it, then, all in vain, child—have I murdered your heart? Oh! I meant well; I meant to save you. Vashti, do you hear? I loved your father; I loved him so much that I would have died by slow torture to save him from his fate. I loved him, and he loved me before he loved your mother. He married your mother, but I always loved him; and when his sane self died, I wanted—oh! Vashti, I yearned as a mother might, to save his children. Forgive me, Vashti, that I made such a terrible mistake—forgive me for my wasted life."

Vashti lifted her hands and laid them on Margery's shoulders, while she said:

"Such forgiveness as mine is you are welcome to, Aunt Margery. I suspect I need forgiveness myself very much. It is a queer, tangled mess to me, somehow. It seems to me life isn't very much worth living for."

Her hands dropped to her sides, her eyes wandered dreamily over the room. The windows were wide open, and through them she could see the cool, fresh shadows of the graves beyond; farther on still was the Everleigh burial-place—just where she caught the gleam of the white tombstones through the swaying leaves.

Margery Gresham was weeping. Vashti turned to her.

"Aunt Margery, I think I should like to see papa. I am going to see him now. Will you go with me?"

Miss Gresham looked aghast.

"Not now, Vashti—not to-day."

"I am going now," said Vashti, quietly, and as she spoke moved toward the door.

"Oh, this must not, must not be!" Miss Gresham cried, following after her. "Dr. Gracie, can't you stop her?"

"Go with her, Miss Margery—go, Philip; as well try to stop the upheaving of an earthquake—you can't do it,

What, Frank, poor fellow, are you going, too? and Nora? It's a pitiful sight, my children. Come, Thorpe."

Philip went first, and Vashti moved with languid grace just beside him. They threaded several passages, and came at last to the great ebon-hued door of the Hermitage. A large, strong door, sunk in the wall, and frowning gloomily upon them.

Trembling, not so much with age as with sorrow and anxiety, the old man selected a ponderous key from a ring containing several smaller ones, and fitted it in the lock of the great door, but he was unable to turn it.

"Hubert," he said.

The young man stepped forward, the heavy bolt shot back, and the door swung slowly open on what seemed, at the first glance, a chasm of darkness. But it was only from contrast with the strong light they were leaving.

They entered a long, wide hall, leading irregularly acros the building. On either hand as they passed along, they caught glimpses of great, echoing rooms, with ivy-mantled windows, and tattered draperies upon the walls.

Pausing before a low, as it seemed, iron door, Hubert, taking the keys from his father's hand, opened it.

They found themselves now in what appeared like an ante-chamber. Beyond was another iron door, larger than the first, and latticed with iron bars in its middle portion.

Margery Gresham pressed forward, looked once into the apartment beyond, and fell back with bowed head, mutely motioning the rest to look.

It was a large, light apartment into which they looked—a circular room—high, airy, and lighted from above entirely. No windows appeared to relieve the monotony of those blank walls.

A little at one side of the apartment was seated a man

with white hair and a white beard, a kindly but very thoughtful face, and a complexion like snow. He was seated at a table covered with books and papers, and seemed immersed in study. At his side, nearer the center of the room, on a pile of cushions, something lay in a heap—something that still had shape enough to chill with horror those hearts in the ante-chamber—something that looked like the remnant of a man. There was a pale, pinched face, with sunken, faded eyes, and thin gray locks about it; there were two long, gaunt arms thrust into some sort of a loose garment, two thin white hands, locking and interlocking their fragile fingers, a great, overgrown body—and—and two dangling stumps in place of limbs.

"He is quiet nowadays," Dr. Gracie said. "He used to injure himself when he was violent, and in one of his maniac spells, he so nearly destroyed both his limbs that they had to be amputated."

Frank looked once through the grating, and went staggering away, with his hand in Nora's.

Even over Vashti's calm, collected face, swept a ghastlier pallor as she looked, and as the miserable shape upon the cushions, by chance lifted its faded, idiotic gaze to the grating where she stood, and opening its shriveled jaws, gave utterance to a terrible cry, Vashti turned away at last, and left the room with unwavering step. The others followed quietly.

As they crossed the threshold of the ebon-hued door, Vashti said, in her cold, clear tones:

"And that is the inheritance an Everleigh leaves his children, is it, Aunt Margery? We have all got to come to that at last, Nora, Frank, and I?"

Margery caught at the wall for support, as she said with

difficulty, but still distinctly, and with a certain solemn emphasis:

"Solemnly, I believe that if you, any of you go down to that fate, it will be your own fault. You have an indomitable will; turn its strength, like a hand of iron, upon the throat of the demon temper that possesses you, and save yourselves."

Vashti shook her head, and with quickened step, leaving the party behind, went quietly away to her own room.

They all gathered at the tea-table that evening, almost as if afraid of the companionship of their own apartments; Nora with her pure, pale, peaceful face, Margery Gresham with her silent, changed manner, and with a visible stoop in her stern form since morning.

Professor Thorpe was affable, conversational, but evidently disturbed under it all. Doctor Gracie, lively, tender, companionable, cheered the table also with his presence. Frank was boisterously, painfully gay.

In the sitting-room, after a little, they all met again, save Doctor Gracie.

Vashti took her stand at the bay-window, which was open, looking forth into the starry summer night. She looked superbly beautiful to-night, and Professor Thorpe thought, as he came into the room a little before the rest, that she had never worn the singular attraction that circled her always with a more resistless air than now.

He came in and advanced hurriedly toward her.

"This is as it should be," he said, eagerly, as he paused opposite her. "Vashti, I leave in the morning. After the word that incautiously fell from my lips to-day, and in spite of your stern avowal that there was not a creature upon the face of the earth for which you would lift your hand,

I am still dotard enough to venture to say to you, Vashti Everleigh, I love you. Vashti, will you be my wife?"

There was no flush in her cheek, no quiver in her voice, as she answered:

"I am sorry, sir; it would be madness in you to cherish such an idea. If I said yes to your prayer, by to-morrow night you would curse the bond that bound you to me. You would—don't interrupt me. I can save you from any such regret, however. I say now, as I said before, there is not in all the world a creature for which I would lift my hand."

"This is, no doubt, your present momentary conviction; you will think differently when the feeling that to-day's occurrences have roused have had time to cool," he said, returning to his usual composed demeanor, for Nora had just entered the room.

"I shall never think any differently from what I do now on this subject. Let us drop it, if you please, sir."

He bowed, with a somewhat flushed face, and presently crossed the room to where Nora sat. The grave and learned professor's dignity had received a cruel blow.

An instant after Frank came in at the open window, and flinging from his broad, white brow the jetty curls, held out his hands to Vashti, with what attempted to be a defiant smile.

She clasped his hands with her own, looked a moment in his unhappy eyes, and said:

"At least we shall go together, Frank—you and I—will dare our fate; and we will never submit—never! Let us live while we may; and when we feel the worst is coming, we will show them that we can at least die bravely, and cheat this wolfish doom of its prey. Is it a bargain, Frank?"

His pallid cheek caught a glow of bravery from her dauntless eyes, and he answered:

"Yes!" hissing the word from between his set white teeth.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LEAVING EVERLEIGH.

A month went by. Vashti was the same reserved, incomprehensible being, to the members of the household, but always self-possessed and composed; and if visitors called, as they did sometimes nowadays, she was courteous and even affable and conversive.

She had never kept up acquaintance or correspondence with any of her Laurel Hill schoolmates, save Violet Granger.

For some reason Violet had never made the promised visit to Everleigh, but they had corresponded regularly; and Vashti one morning astonished Miss Gresham and Nora by announcing that she was going the following week to Clifton, where her old friend lived.

Violet had just left school, and was so glad and happy, that she could not be content till she had dispatched an invitation to Vashti to come and visit her. This invitation came very acceptably to Vashti, who had been for some time casting about in her mind, for an opportunity to take herself from the bounds of Everleigh. Miss Gresham made no reply to the abrupt announcement of her intention, and neither did Nora, but both looked grave.

However, as Nora reasoned to her aunt half an hour after, when they were alone, they ought to be pleased at the

thought of this visit. Perhaps it might cheer Vashti and improve her, who knew?

"But you, poor child," said Miss Gresham, "what will become of you in this dreary old house, alone?"

"Alone? Oh, Aunt Margery!" Nora said, with one of her brave, sweet smiles, "I shall have you and my books, my work and my music, and as for the dreary old house, Aunt Margery, it isn't dreary to me. I like it; I think it is the nicest place I know of."

The sorrowful woman put back Nora's chestnut curls to kiss her cheek, saying:

"Teach me your lesson, my child; I think you have learned in whatsoever state you are, to be content."

At the appointed time Vashti left them, and before her departure she melted enough to say to Nora, with her arm round her, and her cheek against hers:

"I would give all the world to be like you, Nora; but I am not, and I can't be. I have felt kinder than I have acted, sister, but I was so unhappy; I couldn't bear your tender efforts to win me to your way. It seemed so useless, you see, for me to try, and that made me cross. I've a bad heart, I'm afraid."

"Oh, sister," Nora said, clinging to her, "if you would only let me love you—we would be so happy together."

"There, there," Vashti said, taking her sister's arm from her neck, smiling gayly, but with tears on her beautiful cheeks and in her eyes, "love me all you like, dear—the more the better; but it is sheer nonsense to connect happiness with me. Good-by."

She kissed Nora, who said, with quivering lips:

"You will write to me, Vashti?"

"Yes, not often nor much. I sha'n't have time—but I will write."

She kept her word to the letter, writing at long intervals and in the brietest manner. She never spoke of coming home, alluded vaguely to parties, balls, lectures, concerts, and theaters, but still in sufficiently distinct terms to show that she was leading a somewhat gay life, and an expensive one, if any judgment could be formed from the large and frequent calls she made for money. In company with her friend's family she left Clifton, as winter approached, for the city, and from report they heard, those patient, loving hearts at Everleigh, that Vashti had become a belle—the belle of the circle in which she moved.

From Frank they heard, too—not from his letters, for he never wrote, but through that friend before mentioned. The rash, hot-headed young man was leading a sad life. He had failed of being sufficiently prepared to enter college, as he had expected to do this fall, and had suffered rejection at the examination of candidates for that purpose. The friend who sent them these statements, more than hinted that Frank was getting into bad habits, and Margery Gresham, powerless to stop him in his chosen course, could only wring her pitiful, weak hands, and bid Nora to pray God to save Frank.

They thought the prayer was, perhaps, going to be answered, when one stormy, wintry midnight, he came reeling and cursing to the home of his fathers, disgraced—for he had been ignominously expelled from school.

They got him up to his bed at last, poor fellow, where he showed a very crimson and shamed face when they went to him the next day. Toward night he crept forth, a guilty-looking, surly fellow, slinking about the house, and finally in something less than a week, he stole away, under cover of night, for parts unknown. They heard of him next from Vashti. He had joined her in the city; they were

going to keep house together—he and she—in grand style, too.

"Could the Everleigh income support such magnificence?" Vashti wrote to ask, and Margery Gresham, with a sort of grim humor, assured her in return, that the treasury was exhaustless.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STRANGE VOW.

Vashti and Frank had taken a palatial mansion in the most fashionable part of the city. They furnished it from garret to cellar in true reckless style. They furnished, and furbelowed, and garnished, themselves and the mansion. They gave parties, balls, masquerades, soirees, routs, whatever happened to be the fashion. Frank drove the fastest horses, made the biggest bets, gambled the most recklessly, drank the hardest, and in short gave the strongest evidence possible, that he was galloping to perdition faster than any of them.

Vashti gratified the most expensive whims, made the most extravagant toilets of the season—kept the women crazy with envy, the men with love—but with her most diligent efforts was likely to be distanced by Frank in the race on that broad road that leads to destruction.

And meanwhile, at Everleigh, Margery Gresham was growing haggard, thin, and old, and was saying often to Nora: "We could bear to be poor, couldn't we, my darling, if being poor would save Vashti and Frank?" and Nora, wondering each time more, said, "Yes," always "yes."

Professor Thorpe was a leading man in an academy of

science, or something of that sort, in the city—a man widely known and esteemed for his talents and learning. He had never been a gay man before, but he became one suddenly—threw himself, as it were, in the giddy whirl of folly and fashion, of which Vashti had become the center. Wherever she went he went; not always nor often approaching her, but dropping brief, sharp, meaning sentences in her ear whenever he did approach her. Always observant, but never watchful—a votary at her shrine, but only covertly devoted, he never suffered her for an instant to forget that he loved her.

At first she was indifferent as with others, then scornful; then followed anger at his persistence, and words so bitter and resentful that he vowed never to address her again unless she made the first approach, which she did ere long, for she was one of those who acted recklessly, according to her mood. She was variable and shifting as the wind; one hour shy, silent, soft, and yielding, almost letting him fancy that he had power to flush that peerless cheek with faint crimson; the next she would seem to be unconscious of his presence.

The winter passed. Summer took the brother and sister, not home, but one to a gay watering-place, and the other to a race-course, jockey club, and similar diversions. With returning winter the mansion in the city, dignified with the title of home, was refurnished and regarnished, and the old round of party, rout, and ball commenced again.

One evening as Vashti was sauntering with that indolent hauteur that so well became her through a brilliant assembly room, she met Professor Thorpe, with a lady on his arm—a very lovely lady, strikingly so. After the two had passed, she asked the gentleman on whose arm she leaned who the lady was.

"A Mrs. St. Clair," he answered; "an old love of Thorpe's, I have heard—a widow. They do say she jilted Thorpe for St. Clair."

Vashti looked over her shoulder after the pair, and her cheek flushed hotly, but she made no reply.

Thorpe did not once approach her the whole evening, but seemed to devote himself entirely to the lovely widow. The next evening it was about the same, and the next, and so on for a week, Vashti growing restless all the time, and flashing such imperious airs about her, that her train of devotees found it quite impossible to please her; and then, one evening at one of her own parties, she put her white hand on his arm, as he stood waiting to escort Mrs. St. Clair to her carriage, and said:

"I want to see you for half an hour when everybody has gone."

She looked flushed, but defiant, in answer to his inquiring glance, and he bowed without a word, and led Mrs. St. Clair to her carriage with such an exaggeration of attention as made Vashti gnash her white teeth fiercely while she waited angrily for him. When he joined her, she led him silently to a small withdrawing-room opening off the conservatory, and left him, while she received with ill-concealed impatience the adieux of her company.

They were gone at last, and she went haughtily away to the drawing-room in which she had left him.

He was pacing the floor slowly, but as she came in he stopped, facing her, searching her countenance eagerly, with his lips apart, and his whole expression one of the keenest expectation. She made an impatient gesture with her hand, as she flashed her large eyes on him, dewy with unwonted softness, retreating before him, and with one arm against a door at her back, said:

"Stand away from me, or I will leave the room. I did not ask you here to give or receive caresses. Don't you know, Thorpe,"—with her curious, wistful smile—"that love and kisses are not for us? Oh, willful man, could you not suffer me to save you from linking your fate to such an unhappy life as mine is?"

"I would make it a happy one," he cried, breathlessly.

"What made you tear my heart as you have done the past week, with your graceless ways?"

"I wanted to make you jealous. I confess it—I did."

"You confess. Well, rash man, I confess, too. I was jealous—jealous enough to strangle that fair-faced woman." A pause; she eyed him narrowly. "Thorpe you must never torture me so again."

"I shall, if I can. I shall do anything to compass the bliss of seeing you, having you entreat me thus."

She took a step toward him, laid her soft warm hands upon his folded arms, and with her glorious face almost on his shoulder, said:

"My professor, you love me very much, do you not?"

A thrill ran through him; he feared to move lest the ecstatic vision should fade from his sight.

"More than life!" he said, in his deep-toned voice, looking down upon her.

"Would you marry me on any conditions I might impose—mind, any conditions?"

Her face flushed scarlet as she spoke, and with an involuntary movement, she hid it on his shoulder.

He gave an exclamation, half triumph, half ecstasy, his folded arms slid from their clasp to fling themselves about her and hold her in a fierce, strong embrace.

She clung to him, she laid her cheek to his, she suffered him to press numberless kisses on her face, and then she

would have drawn herself gently away from him, but he would not suffer her—he held her fast.

"My arms have hungered for you long, Vashti," he said. "I cannot loose you so soon. To own you I will subscribe to any conditions."

"But that is just it," she said, lifting her head to look at him. "You are not to own me at all. I will make myself your wife; you shall be my husband; but we shall live on just as we have been living, strangers almost, save in the consciousness that each is beloved, and that we shall spend the Great Hereafter together, when there shall be nothing to separate us."

"But, my darling, I want you here."

Her arms were round his neck; she laid her cheek against his, saying:

"I want you, too; my heart aches for you; but I know, I know, when it was once over, when you and I were one indissolubly, I should fall away into the gloom of my nature, and—and you must know what would, what must inevitably be the end of it all."

"Why then marry me at all? Oh, I would save you from all that, Vashti, believe me I would, I could; and then, if the worst came in spite of us, my arms should protect you from yourself."

She shuddered violently from head to foot, and starting from him, said, with her dark cheek changing to a grayish white:

"Never! never! never! When I feel sanity forsaking my mind, I will die. I am not coward enough to prefer life to freedom from the fangs of such a doom. Choose now, for I will never offer even these wild conditions again. Marry me now, within the hour, or never!"

"And then?" he said, with his eyes grown stern upon her face.

"And then go forever away from me; swear never to approach me unless summoned."

"But, Vashti, this is wickedness, it is barbarous. What should we gain but torture from such a course?"

An anguished expression swept over her face.

"I should not have my heart torn asunder with the sight of your tenderness to that hateful woman, that pale-faced St. Clair; or if I did, I should know that you were mine, and mine only, not hers, never hers Choose, sir—will you have me for your wife?"

His usual staid blood leaped in his veins.

"I will have you for my wife," he said, hoarsely. "I will marry you, though the penalty be never to look upon your face again."

He extended his arms as he spoke, but she retreated from him, and vanished through the door, saying:

"I will be back instantly."

He paced the room with fiery impatience. Before he had turned on his restless heel three times she was back. A clergyman, well known to the professor, followed her, and behind him came Frank Everleigh and Violet Granger, the former with a displeased and reluctant look upon his handsome face, and the latter lovely as a Peri from the gates of Paradise.

Vashti wore this evening a robe of white silk taffeta, with white lilies upon her breast and in her hair. Over all, in her hurried absence from the room, she had thrown an exquisite and voluminous vail of gossamer, that fell like a snow mist about her, even to her feet. Thorpe came hurriedly forward to meet her.

With a face like marble, she said, stopping him:

"Swear that you will never approach me unsummoned."

A flush swept over his pale face, but he said, as he lifted the Book she handed him to his lips;

"I swear."

With the same hardy resolution that always characterized her moments of deepest excitement, she gave the Bible into the clergyman's hands, and placed herself with a profoundly solemn air by the man she was about to espouse. The clasp she gave him was by turns ice and fire.

As the clergyman distinctly and impressively proceeded to state the vows and obligations each was pretending to take upon them, her shamed and agonized eyes fell before the solemn words. He lifted up his hands.

"Let us pray."

And as he prayed the newly-made husband felt, in the hand of his newly-made wife, the storm of emotion that shook her fiercely.

It was finished. And as the clergyman, Frank and Violet left the room, obedient to an imperative gesture from Vashti, the wedded pair searched each other's eyes with dreary solemnity.

"My husband," she said, her air all softness and tender deprecation.

"My wife," he answered as tenderly, "you will live to cancel this oath with which you have fettered me. In reality you are as much mine as I am yours."

She trembled before him, silently struggling with her almost unconquerable desire to say; "I cancel it now—never leave me more."

"Vashti, sweet wife, say that I may stay with you always," he said softly in her ear, pursuing his advantage.

With her glance fascinated to his intensely loving eyes, flushes dyeing face, neck, and brow, she was melting with a

shadow of reluctance into his arms, when a little French time-piece in the next room musically chimed the hour.

With a wild cry, she started from him, beating her breast with her hands and moaning:

"God forgive me, I cannot!"

"May God never forgive you if you repudiate the vows you have just so solemnly taken upon yourself," he said, sternly, with his arms refolded upon his breast, and his face pallid, like that of a corpse.

She drew herself up a little haughtily.

"Your oath to me underlies and covers all that ground."

"It does not—I maintain it does not. It binds me, and me alone. All the sin, and shame, and curse of these vows you have just taken, and are wantonly breaking, is yours. I wash myself clean of it."

He spoke with bitter emphasis, and she stood looking at him with scared eyes an instant, and then saying, through white lips, "I hold you to it, nevertheless, remember your oath," she fled from the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

TANTALIZATION.

A week went by. Every morning Professor Thorpe said to himself: "She will surely send for me to-day. She will surely drop me one word of greeting."

But she did not. Every night at the party, ball, or assembly of the evening, he met her, or rather saw her from a distance, cold, stately, beautiful, unapproachable; neither kindness nor recognition in her unfathomable eyes.

The St. Clair he saw also, but he never gave her courtesy or attention but once, and then, the smoldering fire that revealed itself in Vashti's eyes, as she took occasion to pass him, warned him that she would not endure that. He gave her a defiant and reproachful glance in reply, but he carefully avoided the St. Clair afterward.

One evening, as Vashti was dressing to go out, a letter was brought to her. She read it, compressing her lips, and changing color, read it again, slowly, and refolding and re-sealing it, directed her maid to take it to Frank, if he was in his room; if not, to leave it there.

The girl came back with word that she had found him, and given it to him; and presently Frank came himself, looking pale and flurried.

"What is all this confounded nonsense about?" he said, flinging his sister the letter.

"I have read it," she answered, crumpling it in her slight fingers, and tossing it into the fire. "You may go, Sarah," to her maid.

The girl left the room, and Frank watched his sister an instant, calmly selecting from a heap of blossoms from the conservatory, some flowers for her hair, and then said:

"Vashti, you are the most aggravating creature I ever saw. You are as unaffected by this news, for aught I can see, as that girl who just went out."

She smiled a little scornfully, and threw the flowers down, saying, as she took from the drawer a set of opals:

"I may as well be magnificent to-night, as it is likely it will be the last time."

He threw himself into a chair, saying:

"What are we to do, anyway? What is to become of us now? Do stop decking yourself, Vashti, and talk a little."

She made him no reply, arranging the opals, shaking out the lace trimming of her rich dress, and finally, with the utmost deliberation, sat down.

"Well," she said, "brother mine, about this news. It amounts, as I understand it, to this—just this—the money is all gone! You and I have spent in about a year more money than an Everleigh ever did before in a life-time."

"I don't believe it. How could we?"

"Easy enough, when one spends a small fortune as you did yesterday on that span of grays. I did something after the same style yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. This, for instance," throwing him a dainty pocket-handkerchief, "cost about half as much as your grays. There are half a dozen of them."

"I don't care; I don't believe a word of it." He was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing. "What business had our money to be in a bank? Banks are always breaking; and as for that enormous sum Aunt Margery says we have spent, I don't believe it, there! But I don't see what difference it makes how much we have spent. If we had not spent it, it would have been swallowed up in that broken bank. Whatever was the use in Aunt Margery being appointed guardian for us? Dr. Gracie would have put the money in a safe place. It is just like a woman's work. I am glad I shall be of age sometime."

"Pshaw! Frank, it was no fault of Aunt Margery's the bank breaking; and I'm sure she never stinted us in money as long as it lasted. We've spent all we wanted to; and, for aught I can see, you and I will have to go back to Everleigh, or do worse. I've an idea that the house, trinkets, grays, bays, and sorrels will pay whatever debts there are on the firm of Everleigh & Co."

"You talk about it in a wonderful easy, off-hand way,

but you will find when it comes to the"—here he was interrupted again by a fit of coughing. "I say, Vashti, I wonder where I got such a cough?"

"You've coughed all winter. I shouldn't wonder, Frank, if that cough took you out of the world."

"Nonsense," he said, turning pale. "Vashti, I don't want to die. I'm not fit to die; and, I'm afraid, I never shall be."

A coughing spell followed, more violent and prolonged than before.

Vashti sat with an assumption of nonchalance; but, through it all, the gloom that brooded in her heart shone darkly.

Frank got up to leave the room, coughing as he went.

"You are not going out to-night?" Vashti said, inquiringly.

"Yes, I am; I'm going to get warm first, though. Your room is colder than Greenland." He shivered as he spoke.

"You'd better stay in with that cough; it's a perfect hurricane outdoors."

"I'm going if it kills me; and I shouldn't wonder if it did. I couldn't endure being alone to-night."

He went out, and presently Vashti rang to know if the carriage was ready for her, and departed for the evening gayety.

She embraced the first opportunity, after entering the brilliant and crowded room, to summon Professor Thorpe to her side, and bewildered him with the enchanting gentleness of her demeanor.

Never had she looked more beautiful; never had her loveliness taken a more weird form than to-night. All the evening she entranced him with word, look, and smile—

suffered him to attend her to her carriage door, but put him back when he would have entered, saying, as she gave him her hand:

"I leave town to-morrow for Everleigh. You may write me, but I will not promise to answer very promptly. Good-by."

Thorpe bit his lip fiercely as the carriage drove off, and paced two hours in the stormy street, unconscious of wind or snow, so much more stormy was the conflict within him.

Vashti did not leave town the next day, nor the next. Frank was very ill with a lung fever, and continued in a precarious state several weeks. She staid within doors, seeing no one but the household and the physician, and enduring herself as best she might. If Professor Thorpe expected a summons to see his wayward and eccentric wife, he was disappointed; and doubtless he did, for not a day passed that he did not leave at the door what pretended to be a note, but was very voluminous indeed for such a document.

"You did not forbid me to write," he wrote; "and if you did, I should not obey you."

As soon as Frank was pronounced out of danger, and was getting about again, Vashti announced her desire to proceed home to Everleigh. Frank shuddered at the bare thought, but was content to be left.

"I think when I get a little stronger," he said, "Ill sell off all these things here, and make a trip to England, France, or anywhere away from Everleigh. Ugh! I can't endure the place."

Vashti had quite as great an aversion to Everleigh, but what might serve Frank a very good purpose in his pro-

posed trip would be penury for both, and so she kept her aversion to herself and went to Everleigh.

Philip met her at Hart Corners, with the same old-fashioned, lumbering vehicle that had taken her to Laurel Hill six years before. Philip drove himself, greatly to her surprise, and her surprise received no diminution on reaching the house and learning the state of affairs. The servants had been nearly all dismissed; there was only Philip, Elise, and Hubert left, with the attendant of the poor creature up stairs.

Vashti had more than half suspected that the broken bank story was all a hoax—a plan of Aunt Margery to get her and Frank home—but she began to conclude there was some reality about the matter, when she saw Nora and her aunt turning their attention and time to domestic duties; and when Miss Gresham laid before her the official announcement that the bank had stopped payment, she gave to the winds any suspicion she might have had.

Vashti really seemed somewhat improved by her sojourn in society. She was cordial to Nora, kindly to Aunt Margery, but in a wonderful state of dismay about the state of affairs.

Elise was still a stout, able-bodied woman, and did her share, and more, too, of the work of the house. Hubert helped his father, outdoors, and his mother indoors; and Miss Gresham and Nora did the rest.

In her dismay at this state of things, Vashti at first made her presence quite endurable, her manner being less imperious—more gentle and subdued. But afterward she grew restless and peevish.

Thanks to Miss Gresham, employment for her hands was a pleasure to Nora; but Vashti, while she could not endure the sight of her sister "drudging," as she called it, looked

hopelessly at her own white, useless fingers, and could not, or would not, help herself in the least.

She would sit for hours in her own room, brooding gloomily over her griefs, or coming upon her sister sweeping, or attending to some other of the manifold duties she had latterly taken upon herself, would snatch the household implement from her hands, and flinging it across the room, break forth into a bitter tirade upon the whole "disgraceful arrangement."

"Aunt Margery has money," she said, "let her save you from this. I don't believe there is any need of it. You are only doing it to vex and shame me for my idle uselessness. I can't work—I don't want to work—I don't know how, and I wouldn't if I did."

"Aunt Margery has no money," Nora would say in her gentle tones. "She sent her money to you, and Frank, too."

"Sent her money? Then she must have known what was coming; it is of a piece with her usual maneuvering disposition. It was just one of her plans to 'save us,' as she calls it. Does she think she makes the matter any better by bringing me home to this gloomy Hades? The place is as dismal as a mad-house. She knew what we were coming to, I know she did. Why couldn't she tell us? She cheered us on to that extravagant style of living, she did, Nora; she meant to bring us down to drink this cup of poverty's distilling, and if she lives long enough she'll see that she has made another miserable mistake."

Nora did not often reply to such outbreaks as this. She had her own suspicions that Aunt Margery had planned to this end, but she kept them quite to herself.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BANKRUPT, BODY AND SOUL.

Frank wrote once in a while. He had realized something very comfortable from the sale of the "house in town" and its appurtenances, and was traveling in Europe. Health not very good, he wrote, but he thought it was improving. There was now and then an absurd attempt to jest about his malady, which, some of the physicians had told him, might end in consumption. Of course, he said that idea was too incredible for belief.

From time to time, through the winter and spring, he wrote fluctuating accounts of himself—he had taken cold, or been imprudent about diet, or the particular climate he was in wasn't fit for a gentleman to live in, and at last he had concluded to try home air—they might send Philip to the city to meet him if they could, and they might send a bed, too, if they could as well as not—it made him very tired to travel sometimes; all of which had the effect at Everleigh of forewarning them what was coming; and when Philip got out the old carriage to go to the city, Nora would go too.

They had to wait a week or two, for the vessel in which Frank was to come had not reached port.

It came at last, and the gaunt, shadowy-looking personage that strong men bore tenderly to the waiting carriage was Frank—Frank reduced to weakness, emaciation, and hectic flushes, but peevish, restless, and impatient.

Should they take him to the hotel for a rest? No; take him home—home to Everleigh—and home to Everleigh they hastened. That was a dreary ride home. Poor Frank, with his distress for breath, which he tried to ac-

count for by calling the carriage "a close, musty affair," and moaning in spite of himself with some inward mental or physical pain that beaded his white forehead with anguished moisture.

Fortunately the carriage was easy as it was possible for anything on wheels to be, and the weather—the middle of June—fine, rather cool for the time of year, the roads smooth and not dusty.

Frank's first demand, on being assisted to the house, whither he would walk, was for Doctor Gracie. These foreign doctors didn't know anything, they had half killed him with their stuff now. He gasped for breath as he spoke, and was interrupted by a feeble cough that yet seemed to exhaust his little strength.

They had taken him, at his request, to the ruddy-tinted sitting-room; and as he sat in the easy-chair that had been his mother's, with his head thrown back, his eyes closed, and the red glow of the room on his transparent face, he looked like one dead. Vashti, seeming suddenly to have grown weak and nervous, could not endure the sight, and shrank from the room with an expression very nearly resembling fright in her startled eyes.

Margery Gresham, with quite as painful an emotion visible upon her stern face, yet hovered around; and Nora, having hastily doffed her traveling gear, waited near, ready, with her pure eyes and peaceful face, to render any service that might be needed, and which the others seemed quite unfitted for.

Opening his eyes after a little, they chanced to meet the mournful gaze of that pictured face above the mantel-piece. He struggled as in the grasp of some painful memory, saying, pitifully:

"Take it away! oh, take it away!"

Margery Gresham herself, mounting a chair, proceeded with trembling and hurried fingers to take the picture down. In doing so, it slipped from her hand, and fell, with a crash, to the floor, the heavy frame shivered in pieces, and the canvas torn nearly across.

Frank started from his seat, only to fall back feeble and faint.

Margery looked appalled upon the fragments, and Nora, with her shocked brown eyes full of tears, lifted the sad remains tenderly, as if there had been life in them, and carefully removed them to a place of safety.

Dr. Gracie came ere long, somewhat prepared for the sight of the poor, emaciated invalid in the sitting-room.

Frank brightened up wonderfully at sight of the doctor's genial face, and held out his wan and shrunken fingers eagerly. Dr. Gracie's keen but tender eyes took in the hopelessness of the poor fellow's case almost instantly. No need to feel his pulse, with those strangely brilliant eyes feverishly watching every movement, and that terrible hectic spot upon his cheek.

"Have you much pain?" Dr. Gracie asked.

"No, sir, not much; only what comes from difficulty in breathing. That fool of a Frenchman that was on shipboard with me said something about an abscess—an abscess on the lungs. I don't suppose that is anything very dangerous, is it?"

"While there is life there is hope," said Dr. Gracie, gravely.

The hearts of the listeners sunk, all but one. Frank said, joyously:

"I knew you could help me, sir. You see, I have all the faith in the world in you, and they say it is a great help for a patient to have faith in his physician."

He spoke with great difficulty; every word seemed to pain him, and Dr. Gracie, turning away, walked to the window, smothering a groan.

Dr. Gracie stood at the window a little, and then coming back to his patient, talked cheeringly with him a few minutes, asked some more questions and examined into his general symptoms, and leaving some simple medicines, went out into the hall.

Nora followed him, voiceless with emotion, but an eloquence of questioning in her eyes.

He took her hands in his, saying, sadly, "He can't live, Nora," answering her mute questioning.

Her face dropped instantly to her hands, but she soon lifted it, saying:

"He must know it, sir; indeed he must be told. He must not die without any warning."

Dr. Gracie looked at her sorrowfully.

"It will be hard making him believe it, Nora."

"I know, I know, but there is all the more reason he should be told, and by you, for he will be more apt to believe you."

"Well, well, watch your chance, and if you can catch him in the right mood, tell him, if not I will tell him to-morrow, when I come."

Frank's jealous eye caught the sorrowful and changed expression of the faces round him. Vashti had reluctantly come back into the room, because he asked for her, but it was impossible for her to keep out of her countenance the shock she had received at sight of his death-struck face. He looked sharply from one to another, and then said, querulously:

"You all look as though you thought somebody was going to die—don't look at me in that long-drawn way.

Brighten up yourselves and the room. Pile on more wood, coal, something—and throw open that window. What a damp, musty old charnel-house Everleigh is, to be sure."

They opened the window, and heaped high the fire, and tried to look cheerful, but it was a mockery of brightness, that was worse than the previous dreary expression. It was impossible to seem cheerful, in the face of that dread and fear of death, that Frank could not keep out of his eyes, and that all his efforts at unconcern and disbelief only made more apparent. Toward night he grew more and more restless, and seemed nervously apprehensive of being left alone.

Nora never left his side, and he clung to her hand like a frightened child. It had not been dark more than two hours, when he began to exclaim:

"How long the night is. Will it never, never be morning? Will it never, never be morning again?"

He slept at intervals only, and in his chair, for it was impossible for him to lie down, with Nora's hand clasped tightly in his all night. They brought a lounge in for her, but she had no disposition to sleep, even if that passionate clasp of her hand had loosened, which it did not.

Margery Gresham kept the dreary watch with her, that first night, but though he liked her in the room, he would never suffer Nora away from him.

About midnight, he had a very wakeful spell, and would talk half to himself and half to his sister. His mind ran altogether on dreary subjects.

"Nora, am I going to die? Did Dr. Gracie say so?" he suddenly asked.

She put her arms round his neck, and held him silently to her.

He burst into tears on her shoulder.

"Oh, Nora, I can't die—I can't——"

She soothed him, as one does a terribly frightened child, with a caressing movement upon his hair and face.

"Try to trust God, dear—try to trust Him and lean on Him."

"Trust God now, when all my life I have defied him? No, no, my slippery clasp falls away from Him. How I wish the morning would come. Will it ever be light for me again?"

"Dear Frank, dear brother, don't trouble about it; don't you see how helpless you are? Realize it, oh, Frank, and give all your care to God. Try, dear, keep trying."

And so all the night through she soothed him, in her heart of hearts, prayed for him, and sometimes brought her little Bible and read to him.

Morning came at last, and with it Doctor Gracie. Frank fastened frantically upon the hand he gave in greeting.

"Tell me, doctor, how long have I got to live?"

"I hope it may be for many days," he said, with the usual reluctance of a physician to answer such a leading question.

"Many days!" Frank echoed, almost bitterly. "I want to live months and years. What are many days to me?"

There was a long interval of silence, and then he said:

"Tell me, sir, how many days——"

"I couldn't tell you, my dear boy; don't worry about it; you may live a week or two."

Frank shuddered with uncontrollable terror.

"I don't believe I am going to die, sir. Why, I feel better this morning than I have in a great while. You wouldn't try to scarce a poor, nervous fellow like me, would you, doctor?"

"Heaven forbid. You seem to me like an own son, Frank."

He was silent again, moodily thinking. Presently the doctor went out, and Nora, saying "Let me tell him how you were through the night, Frank?" slipped from the room, apparently unnoticed by him.

Overtaking Doctor Gracie a little way from the door, she said:

"Tell me, sir, just how it is."

He answered her instantly and plainly, just as she deserved to be answered.

"He may live a week, and he may die to-morrow. An abscess will form toward the last, and then he will go very quick."

He detailed the symptoms to her of the approaching end in language too plain to be misunderstood, and wringing her hand, left her.

She stood a minute composing her features, and returned to Frank. As she opened the door she was startled to discover that it was ajar, and as she entered, there was Frank catching at the wall for support.

He had followed her to the door, opened it a little way, and heard all.

He submitted with dumb passiveness to be assisted back to his chair, and sat down without a word. Nora made no remark, and he did not himself allude to it all day; but whenever he fell asleep he would start from it with an expression of unutterable terror.

Doctor Gracie, who dropped in again during the day, said to Miss Gresham:

"I don't believe this malady could have made any headway with a constitution like his if it had not been for the

dread that was always preying upon him—the dread of his father's fate."

Vashti sat much with her brother this day; she had in a measure recovered her self-possession, and remained with him, as well as Nora, through the night.

He slept more this night, and Nora had also an opportunity to obtain a little of the sleep she so much needed.

In the morning Nora, who had begun to hope that he was resigning himself to his approaching death, was shocked to perceive the hopeless terror of his eyes.

"The abscess is forming," he said; "I know—I know it is."

And till the doctor came he sat like one already struck with death.

Dr. Gracie did not attempt to conceal that it was true.

Vashti rallied sufficiently to offer, after her fashion, consolation to her horror-stricken brother.

"Die bravely, Frank," she said, but her lips were white; "die bravely. You are escaping the fangs of a wolf more deadly than death.

"You don't know—you don't know!" he moaned. "Death is the King of Terrors!"

Afterward he sank into a kind of despairing apathy, from which, when Nora attempted to rouse him, he would only open his lips to say:

"But I don't want to die—I don't want to die."

And so the day wore away, and the night, no one knowing when death might knock at the door.

The following day, about noon, the summons came.

They were all collected there—Margery Gresham, Vashti, Nora, and Dr. Gracie, Philip, Elise, and Hubert. Frank wanted them all round him.

He sat facing the bay-window, which was open, when he cried, suddenly:

"It is coming! Help me to the window—air, more air!"

They helped; he had risen himself, and he half walked, was half carried to the window, leaning on Dr. Gracie and Nora.

It was a bright day; he opened his great, brilliant eyes wide upon it; he stretched his arms with a spasmodic effort, as if he would grasp it, and cried:

"I don't want to die! I——"

His head fell on his shoulder; his knees crippled under him—he was dead!

There were only pale faces round him. Every heart stood still at sight of such a death—this, so short a time before, gay, reckless, beautiful boy, scarce more than a boy now, for he was only nineteen, torn abruptly from life. Oh! who would wish to die such a death?

Dr. Gracie and Hubert lifted him, laid him on the lounge, and straightened his limbs. He had a little more natural look when they had closed the startling, brightened eyes, and bound up the ghastly chin, but it was a sorrowful sight at best.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LIGHTNING-STRUCK.

Professor Thorpe had never come to Everleigh since Vashti's return thither. He had written often—long, impassioned letters, that Vashti devoured in secret, and then almost guiltily thrust in the fire, but never answered.

At last came one proclaiming itself the last, bitterly reproaching her, and announcing his approaching departure for foreign lands. Though her heart felt as if in the grasp of a hand of iron, she never lifted her pen to say the word that she knew would stay him.

After Frank's death she seemed to have taken into her strange eyes the terror that in his had appeared invincible.

Dr. Gracie looked at her often, saying inwardly:

"I am afraid she will go as Frank did."

One day, several weeks after Frank's death, she was in the dining-room, looking over a newspaper after breakfast, when with a scream that fairly rent the ears it reached, she rose from her seat, took a few frantic steps from the table, and fell like a corpse upon the floor.

They lifted her, the paper still in her rigid clasp, and bore her to her bed—unable to loosen the paper from her hand. They tore it away, leaving a fragment in her death-like grasp.

All efforts at restoring her to consciousness proving unavailing, Dr. Gracie was sent for.

Under the strong treatment he applied, she came slowly to herself, opening her eyes soon, and, after a little, sitting up, but with the most horror-stricken expression of countenance it is possible to imagine.

The doctor and Miss Gresham withdrew presently, leaving her alone with Nora, who sat beside her on the bed, with one arm thrown round her.

The proud girl had hitherto in her deepest trouble rejected all sympathy. Now, however, she threw her arms round her sister's neck, and laid her suffering face upon her shoulder. A few minutes she lay thus, drawing her breath heavily with Nora's tender kisses dropping on her cheek, and then partially raising herself, she looked at the fragment of torn paper, which she still held, and passed it to her sister.

It was a list of passengers lost in the wreck of the ship Europa, a few weeks previous. A little way down the list was a name that Vashti laid her quivering finger on.

"Robert Thorpe, Professor in the Academy of Sciences."

"He was my husband," she said, simply; "and I have killed him, as I did our mother!"

And then she took her arm from Nora's neck, and pushing her from her, said, with an indescribable expression and manner:

"Leave me, leave me, leave me!"

Nora sobbed beside her, pleading:

"Sister, we are all that are left to each other—let me comfort you."

"Will you go?" Vashti answered, almost angrily. "Leave me to wrestle with my fate."

Nora went away reluctantly, and weeping as she went.

She returned to the door after a while, again, but it was fast; listening, she heard no noise in the room, and hoping that Vashti might have fallen asleep, she went away. At noon she returned again, but the room was still silent as death. Under the influence of some indefinable dread or apprehension, she was about to knock, but did not, going

away to consult Aunt Margery, who advised her to wait a while.

The day was a sultry one, in the last of July, the air close, still, oppressive; not a leaf stirring. Everybody and everything seemed languishing with heat. Toward nightfall this unnatural and brooding calm deepened. Suddenly, with scarce a note of warning, great clouds, black with thunder, whirled up over the face of earth, covering it with thick darkness. The wind came down with a swoop and a whistle, and amid incessant flashings of lightning and crashing of thunder, the rain leaped forth in floods.

The house was the scene of the wildest dismay. Through the open window and doors upon which the tempest had burst with such unwarned abruptness, the storm swept like a hurricane, and the thunder seemed to shake the strong old house to its very foundation. All were hurrying hither and thither, with no light save the sheeted lightning, and scarcely able to hear each other's voices above the din of the storm. It took their united strength to close the great hall door, and bar it. One by one the remaining doors and windows were being closed.

Margery Gresham and Nora were together, shutting the bay-window in the sitting-room. In the great and sudden tumult, neither had thought of Vashti, when all at once she started up like a ghost before them, moaning and wringing her hands like one insane with fright.

She had always possessed a great dread of a thunder-storm, and this terrible war of the elements, bursting upon her in her anguished and despondent state, had almost shocked her out of her senses.

Both Miss Gresham and Nora sprang toward her. She eluded their extended arms, sprang through the open window, and out into the rain and darkness. By the glare of

the lightning, they caught glimpses of her, tearing away through the trees, and Nora would have instantly followed but for her aunt's restraining hand.

"Let us find Hubert and Philip," she said, "and send them out with lanterns after her. You could do nothing."

Just as Philip and Hubert sallied out, each armed with a lantern, a stream of lightning poured about them, lasting for several seconds, and most intense in brilliancy. At the same instant, almost, the thunder crashed apparently very near them, with a sound as though every tree in the grounds had been rent asunder.

Appalled, but more than ever alarmed for Vashti, they plunged forward through the hurricane and the flood, aiming as nearly as they could in their bewilderment for the direction in which the frightened girl had last been seen, and thence instinctively made for the stream which crossed the grounds near here, with a deep, but unuttered fear that she might have fallen into it. With a most terrible misgiving, they discovered, not by the glare of the lightning, or the feeble ray of their lanterns, but by the roar of the waters along their banks, that the floods of rain that had fallen, had raised the stream to an unparalleled degree.

Each was about to express his dismay to the other, when, in the same instant, the eyes of each fell upon the object of their search, cowering right in their path.

She was quite incapable of motion, and as one lifted her in his strong arms, while the other took the lanterns, she made no sound, though she was evidently still breathing.

They bore her in, and laid her, with her dripping garments and stony face, upon the bed she had so lately left; and while Nora, sobbing brokenly, wrung the water

out of her long, disheveled hair and dried it with towels, Margery Gresham and Elise removed her wet clothes.

She submitted with dumb passiveness to them, like one in a trance, making no movement, not even to open her eyes, which looked as if glued together.

They put dry robes upon her and got her into bed, but still she never moved or spoke.

Nora hung over her, almost beside herself with grief and apprehension.

"Talk to me, love—sister; just one word to your poor Nora. Do you know me, dear? Only open your eyes once and look upon me."

Vashti slowly moved her head from side to side, and was silent. The three women, with woeful faces, looked at each other.

Suddenly the poor girl started up, and with her eyes still closed, groped for the light, which Elise, who was holding it, instinctively yielded to her. She took it in one hand, and with the fingers of the other pushed up the lids of first one eye and then the other, passing the light so near as to almost scorch them, saying, with an accent of the most unutterable horror, "*Blind!* oh, Heaven, *blind!*" and fell upon her knees, shuddering so violently that the very bed shook under her.

An appalled silence sank upon the group. Miss Gresham was the first to break it, with an involuntary groan, and as, unable to control her feelings, she left the room, Nora knelt by the bed and buried her face in the clothes. Each felt instinctively that this was a blow too recent and terrible to be discussed.

Out into the storm again, which, though past its height, still raged violently, Hubert went to summon Dr. Gracie.

When the anxious physician reached Everleigh, Vashti was raving in delirium—a delirium in which she lived over and over again all the agony, love, remorse, waywardness, and terror of those two years past; in which that strange, intoxicated life she and Frank had led was unfolded like a scroll before the eyes of her listeners.

What a life hers had been! What a life that must be which, if ever she recovered her health, she must enter upon!

Dr. Gracie gave no hope that she would ever see again. She would live, he hoped and believed, but the lightning-stroke had indeed sealed her eyes forever from the light of this life.

The fever ran high, but abated soon, and as rapidly as it had risen, leaving her a mere wreck of her former self, all her haughty and resentful pride, her stubborn and impatient spirit broken up. She lay all the day upon her pillow, feeble as a new-born babe, dependent entirely on the ministrations of others for the merest change of position, and rarely lifting the long, curling lashes from her seared eyeballs. But the expression of her face grew daily a more resigned one, as in her feeble helplessness, her utter prostration, with all that had made life beautiful to her, stricken away, she groped blindly to the foot of the mercy-seat, content to wait humbly there till the Divine Hand touched her and the Master said:

"My daughter, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee."

Then, from the very verge of the grave, she began to mend, and from the faint red of her lips blossomed the old, rare, sweet smile, beautified till it seemed like an angel's smile.

With her hand in Nora's, and Nora's arm round her,

her still regal head drooping a little, she came at last out of her room, and went with faltering but patient step down the halls to sit a while in the great wide doorway, with the October sun shining upon her fragile, folded fingers, and her sightless eyes. Occasionally an expression of exquisite pain crossed her thin, white face, as she turned her head involuntarily to look as some sound broke upon her ear, but she put that emotion away with a sadly patient smile, and her folded hands upon her startled heart. Nora staid always beside her when it was possible, but poverty pressed hard, and Nora was chained to duties burdensome enough in themselves because beyond her strength, but now grown doubly so because they took her from her helpless sister. She bore up bravely, however, and never dropped a repining word.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HOPE DEFERRED.

To add to Nora's difficulties, Elise was now taken ill. In her anxiety to relieve Nora, she had overtasked herself, and, to her indescribable dismay, found that she had only placed another burden on her hands. She kept up as long as she could, but she had to give up at last.

Nora was almost disheartened at this. Strength and courage seemed as if they must fail, but she resolutely tried to keep all expression of it out of her countenance.

Philip went out to find help for her; but the well-trained servants they had dismissed months before had all found places long ere this, and he was obliged to take a

young, ignorant, inexperienced girl, who was likely to be more trouble than profit, judging from appearances.

Margery Gresham had grown old and wrinkled, pinched, thin, and bent in these last two years; but since this sad change had come upon Vashti she had become incomprehensible and strange. She would stand and watch Nora patiently toiling through difficulties enough to daunt the owner of a stouter pair of hands than hers, and then bursting in upon her with an impetuosity very unusual, would take the girl's pale face between her palms, and, searching it with her sharp, sunken eyes, would nod and mutter to herself, "Good girl—brave girl, reward sure," etc.

Nora had another trouble hid away in her heart, as burdensome as any she had felt.

It was six years since she had seen her friend, Leon Brownlee. He had written often—his own brave, outspoken, tender letters; for he had never forgotten the shy, sweet child that had so interested him, and he had got such a hold of her loving, grateful heart as neither time nor absence could ever loosen. Through all these six years gone she had looked forward to his return with inexpressible longing. But now it had been more than twice as long as ever before since she had heard from him, and, with the remembrance fresh upon her tortured mind of that shipwreck in which the idol of Vashti's passionate heart had gone down, she could think of nothing else but the great wave-lashed ocean that perhaps covered him—her friend, her brother.

Her lips grew white at the bare thought. As October advanced, and merged itself in stormy November, this uncertainty of doubt and anguish grew almost unbearable, and she watched the papers, as it was thence Vashti had derived her evil tidings.

One evening, while thus occupied, she started up with a smothered exclamation, and a glance at her sister of the profoundest astonishment.

Vashti, sitting before the fire with her folded hands upon her lap, had inclined her ear to the half-uttered sound. She had already something of the sharpened hearing peculiar to the blind.

"What is it, sister?" she said, in the soft, musical tones that had characterized her speech since her misfortune.

Nora crossed the room, and kissing her on her colorless cheek, said:

"What would you say, sister, if we were to get some of our sad losses made up to us? We do lead a rather hard life, don't we?"

Vashti thought she referred to money matters, and answered:

"Have you any encouraging news from the bank?"

"I guess God is going to settle part of our account for us," Nora answered, with another kiss, and turning away with tears, she could no longer repress, in her brown eyes.

Miss Gresham looked up with a surprised glance, and Nora, laying the paper on her knee, pointed to a paragraph a little way down the page. Her eye, too, went from the paper to the lovely, drooping face at the fireside, and a flush of deep emotion crossed her cheek.

Vashti asked no more questions, and presently, Nora, bringing writing materials into the room, sat down near the fire, and penned with eager, exciting fingers, a brief, but judging from her countenance and shining eyes, a very emphatic letter.

Aunt Margery looked over her shoulder and read as she wrote, nodding and smiling, and throwing, now and then, a keen, bright glance at Vashti. The letter was folded,

sealed, and directed, ready for Philip to take to the office in the morning, and then with her bright air slowly fading out, Nora relapsed into her own sadly foreboding thoughts.

The week passed, and another, and no answer came to that eager letter. Nora made no allusion to it, but if possible she was more than ever tender to Vashti.

One morning, weary with a long confinement, first in the heated kitchen, then in Elise's sick-room, and afterward reading to her sister, she had thrown a shawl over her head, and was slowly walking down the road from the house. Miss Gresham came out and joined her.

"Nora," she said, "what is it you are grieving about? Is this poverty-stricken life really killing you?"

"Oh! Aunt Margery, I am trying to be patient. I am trying, but I want my friend, my brother. God forgive me, I have tried to give him up to His hands freely, but my heart is very sore. This uncertainty is terrible."

Her lips quivered as she spoke, and her voice thrilled with sharp pain.

"He will come again, my child. I know—I know he will; he must," Miss Gresham answered, hoarse with emotion, and went in.

Nora sauntered on toward the highway.

The morning was a bright one, sharp and cold, perhaps, but exhilarating, and unconsciously the spirits of the girl rose at every step. At the gate she paused, leaning upon it in musing attitude, while up the road a little way off a gentleman, muffled to the chin in fur wrappings, was coming toward her at a brisk pace. She had not observed him, and as he came nearer he slackened his step a little, came up almost on tiptoe, throwing back his fur wrappings a trifle, and taking his fur cap off. He looked a handsome gentleman, with his bronzed but fresh-

expressioned face, and his laughing, bright eyes on Nora—dear, unconscious Nora Everleigh, with her crossed hands on the old gate, and her tender brown eyes watching the sunlight among the tree-tops.

The stranger smiled brightly to himself, as he looked at the fair vision, and dropping cap and gloves, with familiar impulsiveness he covered the clasped hands with his.

Nora's upward gaze reverted suddenly to more earthtly things. All the red faded out of her startled face, as she met his smiling glance, and she looked at him with scared eyes.

"Don't you know me, Nora, my little Nora?" he said, almost reproachfully.

Scarlet blushes covered her face, like a rose blushing into sudden bloom, and pulling her hands away from him, she covered her eyes with them, and burst into tears.

He looked pained and surprised, but waited a little before he said:

"Are you, then, sorry to see me?"

"Ah, sir," she cried, almost frantically, "I thought you would never, never come!"

"That is it, is it?" he said, picking up his cap and gloves, and coming inside the gate. "I wrote you word I was coming more than two weeks ago."

She was drying her tears, but her lips still quivered as she said:

"I haven't heard a word from you for six long months."

He smiled as he took her trembling hands again in his, saying:

"Well, I have written you once in two weeks all the time. I did not hear from you, either, but I believed you were safe, for all that."

"But the ocean, sir—the great, cruel, trackless ocean—I was afraid of it."

"Poor child!" he said, with his kind eyes reading her face, "have you got all this pain and wanness of look grieving for me?"

"I shall be well and rosy now," she said, blushing; "but you have come to a sad house, sir."

In a few brief words she told him the sorrowful events of the last six months, and, with her hand on his arm, they went slowly up to the house.

Vashti's face flushed warmly as he greeted her; she was glad to see him, but turned away to hide the pallor that instantly succeeded, as she thought of a pale, dead form at the bottom of the ocean.

Miss Gresham gave way to unwonted emotion at sight of him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CONFESSIONS.

Leon watched the course of things a few days without comment, and then, one evening, he said to Miss Gresham:

"Margery, cousin, I don't understand this at all. How is it that you are all so poor? The Everleigh funds were not all in one bank."

She raised her hand as if she would silence him, and looked with meaning significance at Nora, who stood near Vashti, with the fire-light ruddying her fair, soft features.

He looked surprised, and Nora followed the expression of his eyes to her aunt's shadowed face.

Miss Margery hesitated an instant, and then coming nearer, said, with a half defiant manner:

"I may as well tell it now as any time, I suppose. The Everleighs are just as rich to-day as they ever were; there was only a mere fraction of their money in that bank. Don't look at me that way, Leon; I have told nothing but the truth. I never pretended they were poor, though I meant to make them think so. I wrote Vashti and Frank that the bank was broken, and I guessed they would have to come home. They inferred the rest. I sent the servants off, true; but it was at Nora's suggestion. I never said anything more to her than that the bank was broken, though I meant she should think just as she did, that they had become poor."

Vashti grew a shade paler at this announcement—it called up most painful recollections; and Nora with a bewildered air crossed the hearth, and, with her hand on her aunt's arm, said:

"Aunt Margery, what did you do so for?"

She shook her hand from her arm, with the same expression of hard defiance, and, addressing herself still to Leon, said:

"It has been all that I have lived for these sixteen years—to save these children from their father's fate. Vashti grew up to tell me—ay, and to prove it to me—that I had made a terrible mistake. I did—I did, Heaven forgive me! You would have thought that would have cured me of experimenting, wouldn't you? But it didn't. When I knew that the proud, beautiful girl that I loved as my own life had sought the whirl of fashionable life for the same purpose that the suicide seeks the river bank—when I knew that Frank was gambling, and drinking, and horse-racing with the same bitter, self-destructive end in view,

I said to myself, 'the end justifies the means,' and I wrote that letter that brought them both home at last."

With a wild cry Vashti staggered to her feet.

"Too late, too late?" she cried, tossing her arms wildly, and trying, with her frantic, uncertain steps, to approach her aunt. "Oh, woman, woman, why was your wisdom so tardy? Two weeks earlier would have saved us both. Ah, Father in Heaven, thy retribution is fearful!" She reeled with a dreary moan; Leon and Nora placed her again in her chair, wailing, as she smote her seared eyeballs, "but it is just—it is just!"

Miss Gresham's bowed form shook convulsively, as she said:

"It was too late to save him—Frank, oh, Frank!"

She was silent a few moments, and no one spoke, only Nora, who, lifting her aunt's hand, kissed it passionately. She snatched it from her.

"I don't deserve it—I don't deserve it! See, Leon, how this pure-faced girl loves the old aunt that has wrung her heart so. I wanted to try her too, Leon; I wanted to see if the evil spirit of her race had indeed been exorcised by the Wisdom above mine."

"And what did you conclude?" Leon said, with a glance of exquisite tenderness toward the fair face that answered his glance with flushes.

"I concluded that she was as pure as the snow; without spot or blemish on her soul. I intercepted your letters and hers, but in all that heart-ache consequent upon not hearing from you, she never faltered from what she considered her duty, or fell away into reproach or complaint."

Nora had leaned her forehead against the ebon-hued jamb of the fire-place at this allusion to the letters, and tears were falling at remembrance of the pain she had endured.

"Will Nora forgive Aunt Margery all that sorrow and pain?"

The girl lifted her wet face, struggling with her emotion as she said, yielding her hand to her aunt:

"I don't think you were right, Aunt Margery; it almost broke my heart, but I forgive you."

"She is yours, Leon, all yours," said Margery, pushing her toward him slightly. "I give her to you."

Nora drew back, scarlet even to her temples, and Leon, with an embarrassed laugh, left the room. Vashti lifted her head from her hands to say:

"Aunt Margery, I have been a wayward, bad girl, reckless and defiant of everything that crossed my willful path. Aunt Margery, forgive me all those cruel words I have said to you, and pray God will exorcise my evil spirit, as He has Nora's."

"Vashti," she said, and broke down. "Vashti," she began again, with her trembling hands upon her head, as if in benediction, "God bless and forgive us both; it is not for me to forgive you for yielding to the bitterness of your heart."

Half an hour after Vashti was in her own apartment, and Nora was softly pacing the sitting-room, alone, and with no light but that which came from the fire-place.

Presently, with his quiet step, Leon Brownlee came into the room and joined her in her silent walk.

She did not look up, and when he took her small hand in his she only looked away toward the fire, and by its light her face flushed brightly.

He drew her toward the hearth, gathered the other hand in his, and putting from her cheek the curl that vailed it, said:

"Does Nora give herself to me?"

She drooped an instant before him with blushes trooping over her confused face, and then in the old, outspoken way, lifted her shy, brown eyes to his, saying:

"Nora gave herself to you long ago; she is all yours."

CHAPTER XXXV.

DASCOMB—VASHTI.

One dreary, cold day in December, the Hermitage lost the last tenant it was destined to have. Death came and claimed the poor idiot, and they broke the frozen clods in the little valleyed burial-place, and laid beneath them all that was left of Roscoe Everleigh.

In due time all the old servants, or just as good ones, found their way back to Everleigh. Elise recovered, and there settled upon the old place such a real tranquillity as it had never before known, but which, alas! was destined to be once more rudely broken in upon.

One evening, when summer had come again, Vashti happened to be alone in the sitting-room. The bay-window was open, and from the music-room came the sound of Nora's soft, sweet voice and delicate touch upon the piano.

Suddenly a bold, handsome, wicked face was lifted above the sill of the open window, and as quickly withdrawn. In an instant it lifted itself again more slowly and peered about the room. Nobody there but blind Vashti.

In less time than it takes to tell it, the form that belonged to the handsome, wicked face, followed it, and a man leaped lightly into the room. Sleek, black-haired and black-whiskered, with his white teeth shining between his

lips, and as impudent an air as ever, but with a flurry and discomposure under it all, he crossed the room, and stood with his arm suddenly thrown around her, and his breath on her cheek, as he said:

"Vashti."

It was the voice she had dreaded and feared to hear, all these years that lay between her and this man, who so nearly wedded her to himself and infamy.

She wrenched herself from him as though a serpent had stung her, and without a cry or utterance of any kind, began to grope her way to the door.

In an instant he had closed it, and stood with his back to it.

"Do you want me to scream, and rouse the house to thrust you forth?" she said, recoiling as his hand touched her. "Is not the cup of my degradation full? Go, while I have life and sense left!"

Not in the least abashed before the majesty of those sightless eyes, he said, boldly:

"Vashti, that woman who was between us, is dead. I come to ask you truly to be my wife."

An expression of bitter hatred, loathing, scorn, convulsed her face, as she broke a third time from him, screaming and fleeing across the room to the other door.

It was scarce an instant, when the door burst open, and Nora, Miss Gresham, and the servants crowded in.

"What is it, sister?" Nora cried, with her arms around Vashti, who stood with her sightless eyes wide open, and her hands uplifted.

"That bad man! drive him out! Philip—Hubert! the bold, bad, infamous wretch!—he ran by me——"

All looked about them. There was no one in the room but that belonged to the house.

"There is no one here, Vashti," Nora said.

"He has hid. I am certain he has."

There was a bustle, and the sound of voices in the great hall. Philip and Hubert hurried out, and the rest followed, except Vashti and Nora.

It was Dascomb struggling in the grasp of two officers of justice, who had stealthily followed him to Everleigh, and nabbed him just as he was again escaping therefrom. They assured the poor wretch, in language more plain than polite, that he was sure to hang, and explained to Philip and the gaping servants, that this fellow, this Percy Dascomb, had murdered his wife !

With a sudden and violent effort, the man loosed himself, and darted through the throng.

The officers were quick after him, however, and overtook him in the sitting-room.

He had thrown himself at Vashti's feet, and as the offices touched him again, cried with the fiercest appealing :

"Give me one instant to speak with this lady, and I will go with you peaceably. Forgive—forgive!" he frantically implored as without heeding his entreaty, they were seizing him.

Involuntarily they paused a moment. He turned his wild, agonized face on Nora, crying, madly :

"Intercede for me. Tell her that, wicked as I have been, I loved her. Beg her to forgive me the wrong I was going to do her, by her hopes of Heaven, to stretch forth her innocent hands, and say, 'I forgive you.' Tell her my hands are red with blood for love of her ! Curse you, villains ! wait, wait. Oh ! Vashti, I am going to judgment with a rope around my neck, and so sure as you do not forgive me, I will bear witness against you ! There, curses on you, villains ! she was going to speak to me."

They bore him, struggling, out of the room, and outside the door proceeded to secure his hands with strong cords.

Vashti leaned on Nora, looking faint and death-like.

"Lead me to him," she whispered to Nora.

These rude men fell back as she approached and laid her thin, white hand on the head of the kneeling wretch.

"May God forgive me my own sins as freely as I forgive you, Percy Dascomb," she said, solemnly.

The wretched man covered his face with his hands. Nora led her sister back into the sitting-room, and the officers bore him quietly and with some expedition from the house. Vashti sank into a seat, sobbing hysterically.

"What a degraded being I have been," she said, "to have ever fancied I loved such a man! Oh! Nora, my punishment is heavy, but I deserve it all."

"Perhaps there is some great joy in store for you," Nora said, soothingly; "who knows?"

Vashti shook her head sadly, but the next moment her own rare smile broke faintly over her lips, as she said:

"I shall find it beyond the grave. I wait in hope."

What unaccountable impulse prompted Nora to say:

"What if, after all, your husband were living, Vashti——"

"If he was, if he was—oh, Nora, on my knees I would implore him, as poor Percy did me, to forgive me; to take the poor, blind girl to his heart. He would never shrink from me because I am blind. He would love me so. I should be his wife, as I ought to have been from the instant I took wifely vows upon me. He would have saved me, perhaps, from this——"

She drew her hands across her eyes as she spoke, sighing deeply.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LETTERS.

Nora Everleigh and Leon Brownlee were to have been married in June, but immediately after the incidents related in the last chapter, she wrote him a letter, which ultimately was the means of postponing the wedding-day to an indefinite period. She had never before told him of Vashti's secret marriage, and her unhappy history since, for a feeling of delicacy toward the unfortunate girl had restrained her from confiding the sad and humiliating particulars even to her promised husband. Now, however, she felt impelled, from a hope that he might be able to render important assistance, to lay the whole matter before him. A portion of this letter I will extract from :

"As I was one day looking over the columns of a late paper, I came upon the announcement that Professor Robert Thorpe, who had been believed to have been lost by the wreck of the Europa, had made his appearance in the city, greatly to the surprise and joy of his friends, having been picked up by an outward-bound ship. I immediately wrote to him, informing him of Vashti's blindness, and begging him, if he still cared for her, to come and see her, or commuicate with me on the subject. I never received any answer, and concluded that he wished to cast her off on account of her misfortune, or else that there was some mistake about his having escaped from the shipwreck. Latterly, however, I begin to suspect myself that I have been hasty in my judgment. Will you, dear Leon, make the necessary inquiries and let me know? I have never told my sister that I had reason to think her husband alive.

Better that she should never know it if he repudiates her because she is blind."

To this letter, in due time, Nora received the following answer:

"My Dear Nora:—I 'learn, upon inquiry, that Professor Robert Thorpe was living some three months since. He did escape shipwreck, and there is no doubt that it is the man you are inquiring for. I have every reason to think that he was here at the time you wrote, and that being the case, he could hardly have missed receiving your letter. An intimate friend of his here tells me a very intricate story of the gentleman's enthrallment years ago by a Miss Bond—that she jilted him for a Mr. Clair. He says that Professor Thorpe never recovered from the shock of her heartless conduct, and that he never forgot his love for her, but that when he met her a widow—Mrs. St. Clair—he was completely fascinated by her attractions. He is now, or was at last accounts, in Paris, whither, it is popularly averred, he has followed Mrs. St. Clair. This may be all gossip, and it may have its foundation in truth. I intend to sift the matter immediately, and shall only wait till I hear from you to set off in search of him. Necessarily, this trip will postpone our wedding-day; but if I bring rejoicing for the heart of our dear Vashti, we shall not regret it, and even if the worst should prove true, and Thorpe be a villain, at least there will be some comfort in having all uncertainty removed."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DOUBTS AND ANXIETY.

Arrived at Paris, Leon made diligent inquiries after Professor Robert Thorpe. A young American gentleman whom he stumbled upon at length put him on his track. Mrs. St. Clair was just now holding a sort of miniature court a little way out of Paris. Thorpe was in her suite; doubtless he would find him there.

With great misgiving Leon sought and inquired for Mrs. St. Clair, to whom he had letters. She received him immediately, was enchantingly smiling and polite to him as a countryman, and because of his *distingue* air.

Madam herself was very lovely, and she knew it, and was disposed to take this call of Leon's as a courtesy to herself. He humored her vanity, and, in the course of the sparkling chit-chat that followed, introduced Thorpe's name.

Mrs. St. Clair's eyes lightened at the name. Yes, he was here, she believed; and Leon explained by saying that he held a letter of introduction for him from a mutual friend.

The professor was sent for, and the introduction took place. Leon said nothing of his errand, representing himself as at Paris on business, but disposed to glean some pleasure also from the trip, which indeed was very true. He was anxious to observe for himself a little before opening to Thorpe the object of his journey, and accordingly accepted immediately Mrs. St. Clair's invitation to remain a few days at her country-seat.

He retired soon to his room to dress for dinner. At table he found a large company assembled—ladies and

gentlemen, a gay party—not the least conspicuous among whom was Thorpe, who kept the ball of conversation rolling; but Leon noticed that his wit was inclined to be of the satirical order, and that while others laughed at the *bons mots* he was continually flashing round, he himself never smiled.

After dinner, all day, and during the evening, he lounged near Mrs. St. Clair, who seemed, somehow, tacitly relinquished to him by the others. He was attentive to that lady; but Leon, while he pronounced him an evident admirer of Mrs. St. Clair, characterized him as an exceedingly cold wooer, and he explained his restless demeanor as caused by a remembrance of his unfortunate entanglement with that poor blind girl at Everleigh.

In course of conversation one day he dropped some allusion to Everleigh. Thorpe started at the name, and, changing color, walked quickly away to the window, evidently considerably moved from his usual cold self-possession. He took occasion later in the day, as the two were walking on the terrace, to inquire if Mr. Brownlee was acquainted at Everleigh.

Mr. Brownlee's reply that he was shortly to be married to Miss Lenore Everleigh he received with a greatly surprised air.

"I may as well tell you," Leon said, coldly, "that my business here is entirely with you. I wish to know, as a person delegated by your wife's friends, whether—what your intentions are with regard to that unhappy lady?"

Thorpe stared, growing slightly pale, while he said, quite as coldly as Leon had spoken:

"Come this way, sir; here we are liable to being overheard and interrupted."

Leon followed, with a slightly curling lip, to the Profes-

sor's own room. Arrived there, Thorpe gave him a seat, and himself standing, said, haughtily:

"Now, if you please, sir, state the object of your mission to me."

"Your wife supposes you dead and mourns your loss. Her friends, knowing that you still live, have delegated me to ascertain definitely, and from your own lips, what your intentions may be with regard to her."

"Good Heaven!" said Thorpe, striking the table with his clenched fist, "and is this the account I am called to after the cruel martyrdom I have endured?"

"I should judge you were passing the time quite pleasantly, from the little I have seen," said Leon, somewhat nettled by the angry vehemence of Thorpe's gesture and voice.

"I don't know what you have seen, sir," said the professor, "but I call it the sheerest kind of aggravation when a man stays, at her express dictation, from a woman who is his wife only in name. I call it the most insulting form of aggravation for her friends or anybody else to call a man to account under such circumstances. There, sir, I call that definite language. If my wife—if that woman supposes me dead, let her continue to do so."

"Most certainly we shall, having definitely ascertained your feeling toward her. Her misfortunes are already hard enough to bear; rest assured we shall not add to her burdens by informing her that the man she has deemed the soul of honor, casts her off because of those very misfortunes."

"It is false!" Thorpe cried, hotly. "It was her own deed that sent me from her. Did she not bind me by the most solemn of oaths never to approach her, save when she summoned me?"

"It was a strange oath for a husband to make to a wife. If she was indeed so dear to you, how came you to take such an oath?"

Thorpe made a gesture of the most fiery impatience.

"Your question is a most insulting one. Nevertheless, I will answer it. For the sake of calling her mine I would have foresworn eternity. It was the only condition on which she would even suffer the ceremony of marriage to be said over us—a mockery it was, too; the bitterest and most hollow of mockeries. I never dreamed that she would exact the fulfillment of so monstrous a vow. Don't tell me I cast her off, sir, when I have entreated her by every law, human or divine, to cancel that oath. In despair, at last, I ceased even to write to her. I tried to forget, though I might as well have tried to forget myself; and, after all, the only excuse she can find for my silence, is that I am dead."

Leon Brownlee rose from his seat in much agitation.

"There is some strange mistake here. Vashti was not the only one who supposed you dead. Your death, the announcement of your loss by shipwreck, was in all the papers of your city."

"And almost immediately contradicted——"

"I know nothing of that, and I know that they knew nothing of it at Everleigh till months after. Then Lenore Everleigh blundered upon that account of your almost miraculous escape from death, and wrote immediately to you, without Vashti's knowledge."

"And why without her knowledge?"

"Lest the shock of your desertion of her in the hour of her greatest calamity should kill her."

"Sir, this is an idle play upon words. There was no desertion in the case—at least, none on my part."

"What else could you call it after the receipt of that letter?"

"I never received any letter, and if I had, should not have considered myself authorized to force myself on my wife even, at any other summons than her own."

"I repeat, Professor Thorpe, that there is some terrible mistake. Do you know that Vashti—is it possible that you do not know that our Vashti is blind?"

"Sir! sir! Blind!"

"Blind."

Thorpe looked like a man suddenly stricken with a thunderbolt. He stood staring at Leon, as though bereft of motion.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that the lightning struck her; that she is blind, utterly and hopelessly so; that she is a wreck of her former self, but incomparably more interesting now than she was ever before. If less beautiful, she is far lovelier; and if I were her husband, I would see these hands severed from my body rather than relinquish my right to guide her steps to the end of this life."

The strong man tottered as he approached Leon, and grasping his hand warmly, said, in a tremulous voice:

"Pardon me, pardon me! I have felt angry, despairing, and vengeful. If I had done my duty and hovered in her vicinity, I should have known this sooner; I should have had the precious consolation of—but will she receive me, Mr. Brownlee, even now will she receive me?"

"There is not a doubt of it; she is very much changed. But, Professor Thorpe, I want to ask you—and do not answer the question if it seems to you too great a liberty—how did she come to exact so singular an oath from you?"

"Her father is a madman."

"Was—he is dead."

"Madness is said to be hereditary in the family—she believed she would come to that at last, and therefore was determined to keep our fates separate. She called herself taciturn and gloomy, and said that constant companionship with her would make me hate her at last."

"Singular girl! Were not your fates indissolubly connected by that contract of marriage?"

"There was a time when I hesitated on account of that hereditary taint, but before the invincibleness of my passion, all such obstacles crumbled. I thought if she would let me, I could save her even from that."

Thorpe changed the subject to a discussion of ways and means to reach home with all the expedition possible, and looked already a changed man—much of the gloom of his manner being lost in an impatient and feverish joyfulness, that displayed itself in every movement.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MEETING.

The voyage was sufficiently tempestuous and lingering to give the Messrs. Thorpe and Brownlee an opportunity to draw largely on their united stock of patience. At the wharf they took conveyance for Everleigh, with that headlong haste that usually characterizes lovers.

As Thorpe was rushing with frantic haste up the avenue, Leon seized him by the arm.

"Are you crazed?" he said. "Vashti is very feeble, a sudden shock like this might kill her. Besides you need

to prepare yourself for the great change you will find in her appearance——"

"Good Heaven! Brownlee, what if she should still refuse to let me see her."

He reeled against a tree as he spoke, dizzy with emotion.

"Keep up, man—keep up; there is no danger of that, but you must be calm. Sit here and compose yourself while I go into the house. I will come back for you very soon."

Nora and Vashti were both in a little parlor opening from the great hall. Both still wore their black dresses, relieved, however, with delicate lace ruffles at the neck and wrists. In the faces of both, there was something that glowed purely and brightly, as though a lamp of peace burned within. Nora bent over some fragile bit of work, talking in her soft, yet strong tones. There was softness and dignity too in her air; and Vashti paced the floor, something after the old fashion, for the subject under discussion was a moving one, but with her slender white hand upon the wall as she stepped. Vashti was tall, straight, and elegant, somewhat too taper in her thin shape, somewhat too colorless as to her pale, oval face, to set the minds of her friends quite at rest about her health. Nora's brown eyes, which were now and then lifted to her sister's face, were suddenly intercepted by the sight of Leon standing silently in the doorway.

All over her face went a flush of emotion; she had self-possession to be silent with her questioning eyes on his face.

He smiled and bowed, pointing through the window at which she sat.

With a hurried movement she saw Thorpe a little way

off, pretending to dodge behind the trees, but unable to keep his hungry eyes back from their quest.

She put her finger on her tremulous lip with an emphatic warning gesture, and, dropping her work, went and put both arms round her sister's neck.

"I believe God is going to give you a great joy, sister," she said, gently.

Vashti returned her caress.

"God is good, dear," she answered, as gently.

"Could you bear to hear a very great, grand piece of news?" kissing her.

"News, Nora—what news could affect me? Let me see—I expect no news that I can think of. What can it be?" playfully, and with brightly-interested expression.

"Something you don't expect, Vashti—think. What would you ask God to do for you this minute, if you were going to crave the removal of one of the afflictions he has laid on you?"

Bravely Nora kept her agitation out of her voice.

Vashti struggled a moment with some rising emotion.

"Nora, Nora! why do you ask me that? Mamma cannot come back to me."

"No; but somebody else might," restraining herself with difficulty from tears, and with her tones broken in spite of her.

"What is it you mean?" Vashti exclaimed, seizing her passionately, and the next instant losing her hold. "I should indeed be presumptuous to hope that——"

She paused, and seemed lost in thought. Nora scarcely breathed as she watched her sister.

Vashti put her hand on Nora's face.

"There are tears on your cheek, and your voice did

tremble with joy. Nora—Nora—can the sea give up its dead? Speak to me, Nora, or I shall die!"

"Sister, I have heard that he still lived—that——"

There was a noise at the window. Vashti turned her whitening face toward it, with her arms extended, and her sightless eyes wide open.

"My God, if I could only see! Nora——"

"My darling! my darling! I have come back to you!"

He had sprung through the open window into the room—he had her in his arms, and she clung to him as though she would never let him go.

Nora looked anxiously at her sister. Leon drew her away, saying, tenderly:

"She is in safe hands; he will not let her die."

They went out quietly into the hall, closing the door after them—a fair, beautiful pair—love, purity, and truth in their hearts and on their brows. Her hand was in his, and his arm round her, as they went down the steps and out into the misty twilight that was gathering. Nora cast, now and then, apprehensive glances back toward the parlor, but all still seemed tranquil there.

"We will be married one week from to-day, Nora," Leon said, caressing the little hand he held. "Can you be ready?"

There were still tears in her brown eyes, but she flashed a shy glance at him, as she said "Yes, sir," in her usual prompt style.

He answered her with a warmer caress, and said:

"My father and mother will be here Tuesday. I dropped them a line to that effect as I came along."

"Will they like me, do you think?"

"I am very much inclined to think they will," he said,

laughing at her anxious tone. "Indeed, I haven't a single doubt of it."

As Nora and Leon left the parlor, Vashti tore herself from her husband's passionate clasp, and laid her beautiful head in the dust at his feet. In vain he tried to lift her.

"Here! here!" she moaned, "here is my place till I have confessed and been forgiven! Oh, Robert—my husband—sit down and hold my head upon your knees, if you will, till I have told you!"

She made him sit down. She knelt and poured forth all that burning recital of her life of pain and bitterness. She sounded the depths of the resentful nature that had been hers relentlessly, and showed him how all her life she had gleaned and garnered only chaff and wormwood out of the beautiful harvest with which God had folded her way. She did not spare herself in the least, neither in her errors nor their expiation.

Thorpe sat in stilled awe under the torrent of her eloquent outpouring. When she ceased speaking he drew her resistless again to his arms, caressing her tenderly.

She roused him by saying:

"I knew you would love me none the less."

With an impulsive movement he pressed kiss after kiss on her brow and lips.

"More—more, a thousand times, my wife. I like your proud spirit dependent on me—on me, alone."

"But I'm not proud now," she said, clinging to him; "my pride is all gone. I am only a broken reed—humble, suppliant, dependent on God and you as a little child."

When Nora and Leon entered the room soon after, the professor was still supporting Vashti. Both had been

weeping. She raised her head from his shoulder, her blushes making her cheeks look like carnations.

Nora came to her swiftly, and with one arm round her sister, extended her other hand to the professor, saying:

"Everleigh is glad to see you, sir."

* * * * * * *

At the appointed time Leon and Nora were married. They had a grand, gay wedding. Leon would have it so. He meant their united lives should, from that hour, be one gay summer time. They lived at Everleigh, except at brief intervals, during which they visited their mutual relatives, or traveled to other climes, both for pleasure and profit.

Professor Robert Thorpe resumed that place in the world which he had once cast disdainfully from him—in the days when he was hopeless and despairing. He became, in many senses, a different man, from companionship with his wife's pure and simple faith.

Philip lived to a hale old age—lived to acknowledge with wondernment and something of awe that the Curse of Everleigh was removed.

Margery Gresham died in Nora's arms, thanking God that He had done so well the work for which she had proved herself so incompetent.

THE END.

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